

Willie Ruff

Biography

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Willie Ruff, hornist and bassist, holds both undergraduate and graduate degrees from Yale University. Upon receiving his master's degree in 1954, he tried to win a position with an American symphony orchestra, but found that black musicians were not yet welcome in those ranks. Instead, he accepted the position of Principal Horn with the Tel Aviv Symphony. Not long before he was to leave, he happened to watch The Ed Sullivan Show and saw not only Lionel Hampton's band but, to his surprise, friend Dwiki Mitchell at the piano. After contacting his old friend, Ruff was invited to join the Hampton band and never went to Israel. In 1955, the two friends left Hampton to form the Mitchell-Ruff Duo, with Willie on horn and bass. But the duo's real origins go back to 1947, when they were servicemen stationed at Lockbourne Air Force Base, near Columbus, Ohio. Mitchell, a 17-year-old pianist with the unit band, needed a bass player for an Air Force radio show, and he saw a likely candidate in the newly arrived Ruff, who at that time only played the Horn. "He was just a kid, 16 years old," Mitchell recalls, "with a lot of hair, fire-engine red, practically down to his eyebrows. But he had all this energy, and he was eager to learn. So I taught him. Every time he made a mistake I said, 'You got to stand in the corner,' and he hated that, and he'd scream and holler—he had the loudest scream you ever heard. But he never made the same mistake again." Since 1955, the Duo has recorded, performed, and lectured on jazz extensively in the United States, Asia, Africa and Europe. It had the advantage, Ruff recalls, of being the least expensive group in jazz, and it was therefore booked as the second act with the best and most expensive bands of the day - Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie—in Birdland, the Embers, the Village Vanguard, Basin Street East and other leading nightclubs. They were all riding the crest of one of the most popular eras of jazz—an era that would soon end with the advent of rock and the dominance of television.

What made it an unusually rich period for Mitchell and Ruff was that the older musicians, after playing their set, would stick around and tell the two younger men what they were doing wrong and what they could do better. "We learned everything from those men," Ruff recalls. "They were our mentors." This experience, coupled with the same kind of generosity that they had found among the older musicians who were stationed at the air force base, nourished a teaching bent in Mitchell and Ruff that shaped their own lives

careers. In the late 1950s they toured widely for a group called Young Audiences, playing and demonstrating jazz for students in elementary schools and high schools, and since the mid-1960s their main format has been and still is the college concert. They give 60 or 70 a year on college campuses, where they are great favorites. It was the Mitchell-Ruff Duo that introduced jazz to the Soviet Union, in 1959, playing and teaching at conservatories in Leningrad, Moscow, Kiev, Yalta, Sochi, and Riga; and it was the Mitchell-Ruff Duo that brought jazz to China, in 1981, playing and teaching at conservatories in Shanghai and Peking. Before the first trip Ruff taught himself Russian, his seventh language, and before the second trip he learned Chinese, thereby enabling himself to explain to his listeners, in their own language, the roots and lineage of American jazz, with Mitchell demonstrating on the piano.

Teaching and learning have been strong currents in the lives of both men. Ruff joined the faculty at Yale in 1971, and has taught Music History, courses on Ethnomusicology, an interdisciplinary Seminar on Rhythm, and a course on Instrumental Arranging. He is founding Director of the Duke Ellington Fellowship Program at Yale, a community-based organization sponsoring world-class artists mentoring and performing with Yale students and young musicians from the New Haven Public School System. The program brings the giants of black American music to New Haven throughout the year to teach at Yale and in the city's predominantly black public schools: singers like Odetta and Bessie Jones, arrangers like Benny Carter, tap dancers like Honi Coles and instrumentalists like Charlie Mingus and Dizzy Gillespie.

Ruff's 1992 memoir, A Call to Assembly was awarded the Deems Taylor ASCAP award. He has also written widely on Paul Hindemith, one of his teachers at Yale, and on his professional association with the American composers, Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. His collaborations with Yale geologist, John Rodgers on the musical astronomy of the 17th -century scientist, Johannes Kepler, resulted in an important "planetarium for the ear" currently on CD and published widely in international astronomy journals. Ruff has also written on music and dance in Russia, and on the introduction of American Jazz in China where he has lectured in Mandarin. his next book, Six Roads to Chicago explores the relation of culture in Chicago to life in its hinterlands. Film is also an important teaching tool to him, and he has visited the pygmies of the Central African Republic, the master drummers of Bali, the tribesmen of Senegal and various other remote societies to make films about their drum music and language.

Ruff is a man on the move, constantly generating new projects to supplement an academic and artistic life that is already full.

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