



NCCU Vocal Jazz Ensemble

NCCU SETS NEXT COURSE FOR JAZZ STUDIES *by Eugene Holley*

Jazz, and change, is in the air at North Carolina Central University (NCCU) in Durham, one of the nation's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU).

As reported in *DownBeat* (October 2021), Dr. Ira Wiggins retired as the director of the jazz program of NCCU last June after more than three decades of guiding jazz education efforts at the school. His departure posed both challenges and opportunities for this program established in 1977 by famed trumpeter and educator Donald Byrd. But a vision for the future of the school's lauded jazz program is taking shape.

"One of the things that's really a hallmark of this program is the element of swing," said Baron Tymas, a professor and guitarist who is serving as the interim chair of the department of music at NCCU. "What we teach here has to do with the way that swing was brought

to its pinnacle by artists like Count Basie and Thad Jones. So, when I talk about the element of swing, I don't mean swing music; I'm talking about the quality of swing. And that's something that Wiggins really stressed."

According to Tymas, the goal of the program is to produce students who swing, but are also well-rounded. "In our curriculum, we stress the traditional rudiments; learning to read is really important," Tymas said. "We want our students to be versatile. And we want them to know how to interpret everything in the score. They do a lot of listening, but it's not to the exclusion of learning."

That invaluable, but practical, approach — which largely stems from the African-American

aural method of jazz instruction that gave birth to the art form — is the pedagogical basis of the NCCU Jazz Ensemble, currently under the direction of saxophonist Brian Horton.

The ensemble — which performed at Jazz at Lincoln Center's inaugural Jack Rudin Jazz Championship in New York in 2020 — has an impressive list of alumni including Grady Tate; Leon Pendarvis, who served as music director for *Saturday Night Live*; and Albert Strong IV, a trumpeter, composer and bandleader who earned his undergraduate degree in jazz studies from NCCU (before receiving a master's from Northern Illinois University), and now serves as an adjunct trumpet professor at NCCU. Strong co-founded The Art of Cool Project and