THE WAIT IS OVER

Philadelphia gets its own jazz orchestra, featuring several musicians with ties to Bucks and Montgomery counties.

By **NAILA FRANCIS**
STAFF WRITER

It took all of 30 minutes. Terell Stafford may have been kicking around the idea for six or seven years, but once the celebrated trumpeter and music educator decided it was time for Philadelphia to have its own jazz orchestra, the 17-member ensemble came together with astonishing swiftness.

Stafford, the director of jazz studies and the chair of instrumental studies at Temple University, was at the airport on his way to Seattle last year when he began compiling a list of names: musicians like Temple colleague Dick Oatts on lead alto saxophone and jazz and classical phenom Nick Marchione on lead trumpet; legendary bassist Lee Smith; and sought-after trombonist and University of the Arts teacher Randy Kapralick. Alongside such veterans, he also enlisted younger talents like drummer Chris Beck and trombonist Joe McDonough, a 2005 Neshaminy High School graduate whom Stafford taught and mentored at Temple.

"Wynton Marsalis gave me great advice: He said choose the best musicians you can," said Stafford, who has played with many of these guys — Oatts and Marchione are cohorts in the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra — or seen them perform live. "There was no audition process. It was really strange. It took me 15 minutes to put the orchestra together and then another 15 to call or text everybody and before the plane took off, they all got back to me and said yes.

"These are not only great musicians, they're incredible human beings and I think that's what makes them so great at what they do."

A year later, the Jazz Orchestra of Philadelphia, which he founded with jazz patron Deena Adler, also the manager of influential saxophonist Odean Pope, is making its Kimmel Center debut with a gala fundraising concert Tuesday in Verizon Hall. The event, emceed by Bill Cosby, will feature guest appearances from renowned and homegrown talents, including Marsalis; Cheltenham-reared trumpeter and flugelhornist Randy Brecker; saxophonist and arranger Jimmy Heath, of Philadelphia's legendary Heath Brothers; nine-time Grammy-nominated jazz pianist Kenny Barron; master tenor saxophonists Pope, Larry McKenna and Bootsie Barnes; and longtime local jazz hero Tony Williams, an alto saxophonist and 1949 graduate of Abington High School.

"I'm really honored to be doing this because I feel like Philadelphia is my home. I was serious about music in high school but I really got clear direction from my teachers at Temple. Living in Philly is where I really started to become a musician," said McDonough, now a New Yorker whose parents, Jule and Kevin, still live in his hometown of Trevose.

It was Stafford who coaxed the young trombonist through his fear of pursuing music full time when he enrolled as an education major at Temple.

"He in a way saved my life. He really instilled great discipline and a great understanding that if you work hard and you really pursue what you want, you can get it," said McDonough, who has since received a master's in jazz from Juilliard and performed with bassist Christian McBride, double-bassist Ron Carter and Scott Bradlee and the Postmodern Jukebox. He also has a regular gig with the Hot Sardines, whose mash-up of Dixieland, hot jazz, standards and originals had them proclaimed one of the best jazz bands in New York by *Forbes* magazine.

"Joe came to Temple with the greatest attitude that I've ever seen in a student, always stopping me in the hallway and saying, 'Can you teach me something, what can I do to get better?' " recalled Stafford, who was moved to tears when McDonough joined the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra for a rendition of Thad Jones' "Kids Are Pretty People" during his senior year. "He played with so much passion and beauty and so much authority. As a teacher, when students can move you emotionally, it says you have done your job but also that they have gone deep into their hearts and souls to bring the music out of themselves."

That emotional resonance is the essence of the "Philadelphia sound" embraced by JOP.

"With the Philadelphia sound, to me, the first word that comes to my mind is just soulfulness. For an artist to be soulful, there has to be emoting going on. That's what the jazz orchestra can be," said Stafford. "When you put together friends and people who trust each other, people who like to hang out and laugh and create relationships off the bandstand, then the music that's made on the bandstand shines and moves people emotionally, spiritually and otherwise."

The orchestra hopes to not only preserve and expand the city's rich jazz legacy while creating educational opportunities for students but boost its reputation as a destination for jazz performance. Tuesday's concert will include works by acclaimed pianist McCoy Tyner and saxophonists Benny Golson and Norman David, all from Philadelphia, as well as an arrangement written by Pope especially for the orchestra.

"We're going to be doing music that represents the history of Philadelphia past and present," said Stafford, whose future plans as artistic director include commissioning new works from composers both locally and nationally.

"Every major city should have a jazz orchestra," said McDonough. "I'm happy that Terell is doing this now."

For years, as he traveled across the U.S., Stafford would think about starting such a project. But it wasn't until two years ago — after hearing musicians at the Pittsburgh Jazz Festival talk about the Pittsburgh Jazz Orchestra — he said the words out loud. When shortly after, he got a call from Adler proposing such a venture, he knew the timing was right.

He also knew there'd be no more fitting emcee for JOP's inaugural celebration than Cosby, who helped launch his Philadelphia career and who has always possessed an evangelical fervor for jazz. The Miami-born trumpeter was working in D.C. when he was encouraged to audition for Cosby's revival of the TV game show "You Bet Your Life," which was taped at Philadelphia's WHYY studios, in 1992. As the show's musical director, Shirley Scott, and house band saxophonist Tim Warfield introduced him to the city's jazz scene, Cosby encouraged him to teach. And so Stafford, who has performed with countless groups, from Tyner's Latin All-Star Band to the Clayton Brothers Quintet, commenced his path as an educator at Cheney University.

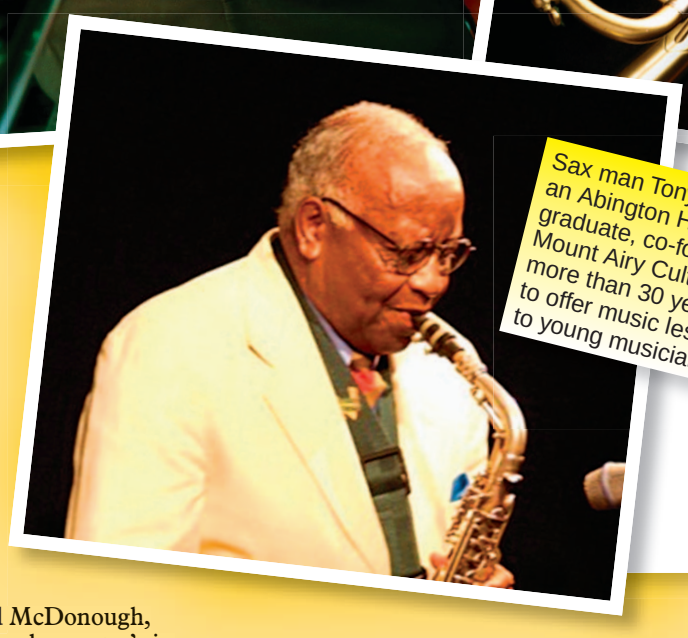
"Bill Cosby is just an incredible, incredible human being. He's not only a funny man but incredibly intelligent, a real mentor," said Stafford. "With the Jazz Orchestra of Philadelphia, we're not only bringing musicians together but bringing listeners together and showing that when we all work for the betterment of music, bigger things can happen."

Naila Francis is a feature writer at Calkins Media. Phone: 215-345-3149. Email: nfrancis@calkins.com. Twitter: @Naila_Francis.

"Terell Stafford has always had great ideas and I'm just really pumped to be part of this group and see what he'll do with it," said Joe McDonough.

PHOTO BY LYNN REDMILE

"There's so many great musicians in Philadelphia, choosing 17 is really difficult. To me, everyone in Philadelphia has a great name," said Terell Stafford of putting together the city's first jazz orchestra.

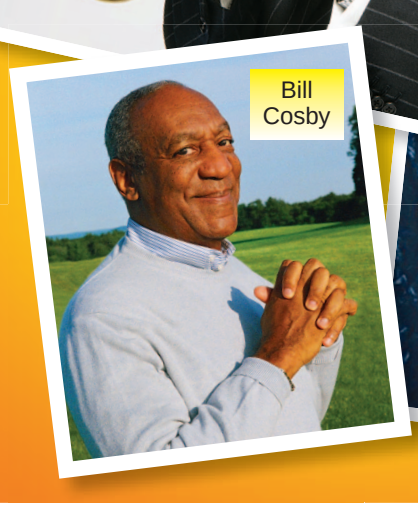


Sax man Tony Williams, an Abington High School graduate, co-founded the Mount Airy Cultural Center more than 30 years ago to offer music lessons to young musicians.

More information

The Jazz Orchestra of Philadelphia's Grand Gala Fundraising Concert takes place Tuesday in Verizon Hall at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, Broad and Spruce streets, Philadelphia. Show time: 7:30 p.m. Tickets: $35 to $150. Information: 215-893-1999; www.kimmelcenter.org.

Wynton Marsalis



Bill Cosby

Randy Brecker