

Profile

BIG JAZZMAN ON CAMPUS

Bassist and teacher Rodney Whitaker finds his groove leading Michigan State's jazz studies program

BY DEDRIA HUMPHRIES BARKER

Rodney Whitaker happily goes the distance in the name of jazz — more than 700 miles a week, in fact. He's used to it. A bass player, Whitaker was on the road for 15 years playing one gig after another around the world, from Africa to New York City.

Though he says it takes him "an hour-10" to get from Detroit to East Lansing, it's a far cry from the high-speed life of a full-time touring jazz musician. He's been on the Michigan State University faculty for seven years, and a year and a half ago became director of the MSU School of Music's jazz studies program.

It's a turn Whitaker thought he'd never make. "My plan was just to be a musician," he says. "But traveling around and playing, you see there is a need for people who know the music to be teaching it. It was a natural progression."

After graduating from Detroit's Martin Luther King High School, he stayed one year at Wayne State, then took to the road. In nearly two decades, he's played with a rich assortment of jazz talents, many of whom were under the banner of Jazz at the Lincoln Center, directed by trumpeter Wynton Marsalis. Whitaker also made four CDs of his own and recorded with other musicians.

He still plays, and hasn't entirely forsaken touring. Soon after finishing his current gig at Detroit's Harlequin Café later this month, he'll leave for a five-week European tour with Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

Experience was Whitaker's ticket to the MSU job. He took his first teaching assignment there seven years ago after leaving the Roy Hargrove Quintet and teaching on the adjunct staffs of U. of M. and Juilliard.

His presence at MSU is a magnet for other jazz musicians who drop in as guest instructors. During Whitaker's time on the faculty, Detroit trumpeter Marcus Belgrave has dropped in, as well as Wynton's brother, saxophonist Branford Marsalis. Since Whitaker took over as director of jazz studies, trombonist Wycliffe Gordon, saxophonist Ron Blake and drummer Gerald Cleaver have visited, helping him handle classes, two big bands and two octets.

Whitaker frequently boasts about the university's recent approval of a bachelor's degree in jazz studies. It marries intellect to emotion, he says.

"One of the things that has kept people from respecting our music is the idea that it is pure emotion," he says. "You can't play music unless you have your technique together."

It's a compelling reason — a driving force — to hit the road each day. ■

