A Brush with the Blues: Bob O’Meally Plays Pivotal Role in a New Jazz Project

The remarkable story of the creation of this CD began with a phone call to the Romare Bearden Foundation from Ruth Fine, curator of a major new exhibit of Bearden’s work on view at the National Gallery in Washington D.C. Fine was seeking help in compiling a CD to accompany the exhibit. It would be a collection of jazz works that likely influenced Bearden’s paintings.

Columbia’s O’Meally, who is director of the musical sleuthing of Bob O’Meally and his quartet. The inquisitive musician and Marsalis, a frequent visiting lecturer at the Center for Jazz Studies, were asked to position themselves. The artist grew up in Harlem in the 1920s and 30s, and his allusions to jazz unfold in many of his colorful paintings.

The paintings of Bearden, who died in 1988, tell a multitude of stories about the golden age of jazz. Bearden’s undying passion for jazz even inspired him to enter the realm of musical composition himself. The artist grew up in Harlem in the 1920s and 30s, and his allusions to jazz unfold in many of his colorful paintings.

A sampling of jazz references in his work have been interpreted into music on a new CD by Branford Marsalis and his quartet. The CD project was born, in part, with the musical sleuthing of Bob O’Meally, who is director of Columbia’s Center for Jazz Studies.

“...the musician playing the paintings of a visual artist who had a mighty brush with the blues.”
Robert O’Meally

“The Romare Bearden CD and the exhibit brings together jazz and art history,” said O’Meally, who also wrote the liner notes for the CD. “It is a prime example of the kind of interdisciplinary approach supported by the Center for Jazz Studies, which hopes to include a course on Romare Bearden in the future.”

Creating the jazz CD took only three months. Drawing on his knowledge of jazz and his personal acquaintance with the painter and his family, O’Meally began his investigation in May. He sifted through roughly 600 Bearden paintings and compiled a notebook of 50 that evoked prominent references to jazz. He wrote notations for each painting, a chronology of Bearden’s life, and suggestions for music selections for the CD. But O’Meally still needed a company to release the record. He knew jazz musician Branford Marsalis had started a new record label.

O’Meally placed a call to Bob Blumenthal, who works for Marsalis’ company, Marsalis Music. Blumenthal quickly passed the notebook along to the musician, and Marsalis, intrigued, joined wholeheartedly in the process. He studied the materials at length, and in the end, agreed not only to release the music on his record label, but to perform the music with his quartet and to enlist his family members (father Ellis, and brothers Wynton, Delfeayo and Jason) as well as a few friends (Harry Connick Jr. and Doug Wamble). On the CD, Connick performs a number called “Carolina Shout!” and Wamble performs his composition “Autumn Lamp.” Also included is “I Thought of You” by Wynton Marsalis, a frequent visiting lecturer at the Center for Jazz Studies. Wynton’s album “J Mood” featured a Bearden painting for its cover.

Branford Marsalis drew on his knowledge of Bearden’s life to help extract from the paintings their musical references. For instance, one of Bearden’s paintings, a piece called “B’s Paris Blues,” depicts the faces of two jazz musicians Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, who were of great importance to Sidney Bechet, a New Orleans jazz clarinetist and soprano saxophonist who spent time in Paris. Even though the painting Paris Blues also prominently features the gigantic black and white keys of a piano, Marsalis chose to use the very Bechet-like saxophone presence instead. To build on Bearden’s allusion to Bechet, Marsalis is quoted in O’Meally’s liner notes: “I was thinking about Bearden’s Paris years, and about Sidney Bechet, who made great records in Paris...”

O’Meally and Marsalis met for the first time at one of the recording sessions for the CD.

Wrote O’Meally: “This recording can be considered part of a jam session in which Romare Bearden’s paintings play a vibrant part: the musician playing the paintings of a visual artist who had a mighty brush with the blues.”

To hear excerpts from the CD, visit www.columbia.edu/cu/news.

Marconi Fellowship Foundation Inducts Newest Fellows at Waldorf, Where the “Father of Wireless” was First Celebrated by Peers

PHOTOS COURTESY ROMARE BEARDEN FOUNDATION, LICENSED BY VAGA, NEW YORK

PHOTO BY MATHEW MAURO

The venue for the formal affair last Friday was the Waldorf Astoria, the very same place where more than a century earlier the nation’s engineering professional organization first celebrated Guglielmo Marconi for his unprecedented feat of sending a wireless signal across the Atlantic. This time, approximately 260 guests gathered to not only salute the “Father of Wireless Communications,” but to induct the newest members of the Marconi Fellowship, an organization consisting of the world’s leading communications pioneers who are the inventor’s intellectual heirs. Robert Gallager, left, a noted MIT information theorist, and Robert Metcalfe, right, an engineer and entrepreneur best known for developing the ubiquitous Ethernet high-speed communications standard, were congratulated by Marconi Foundation board member Dean Zvi Galil of Columbia’s Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science.

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