The music of jazz greats Louis Armstrong and Clark Terry recently filled the rafters of Low Library as Robert O’Meally, Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature, and founder and director of Columbia’s Center for Jazz Studies, delivered the Spring 2005 University Lecture. O’Meally discussed the relationship of jazz, a music that is “part of a gloriously rich American and international culture,” with the work of Ralph Ellison, a writer and musician who once described himself as “a banging bag of words, imitating the trumpet and trombone tunes.”

In a speech titled “The Music Demanded Action: Remembering Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man,” O’Meally spoke about the ways in which jazz has influenced writers from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Jack Kerouac—“in their rhythms and narrative tone and form—as well as political change, including the civil rights movement. “Jazz is not just entertainment to shake a leg,” O’Meally explained, adding that it is an art form that is “the music of freedom and experimentation, the signal song of consolation and protest.”

At Columbia, jazz has become a component of the Core Curriculum. Provost Alan Brinkley, who introduced O’Meally, said that because of the professor’s efforts, Columbia is a leading academic site for the study of jazz. “Harlem and New York City are the capitals of jazz, and we take jazz seriously as a subject of study,” Brinkley said.

Recalling that music was a way of life for writers like Ellison, O’Meally said that jazz inspired them to create words that “talk and swing on the page and reflect the tragicomic sense of life,” similar to the improvised informality of jazz music. As an example, O’Meally quoted a 1948 piece by Clark Terry called “Trumpet Mouthpiece Blues,” in which Terry takes the mouthpiece off of the horn and conducts what some consider to be a conversation between the instruments.

Jazz has also been a catalyst for something that no university by itself can altogether impart: a vivid sense of the largeness of human brotherhood, a vivid sense of man’s increasing obligation to man, a vivid sense of our absolute dependence on one another.”

Around that time New Yorkers represented 80 percent of the graduating class. Today, Columbia students come from every state and more than 180 countries. Yet, commencement at Columbia is still a New York affair, with the oldest higher education institution in the state, celebrating with arguably the largest graduating classes and audience in the City.

More than 50,000 students, alumni, faculty, family, and University guests are expected to gather at Low Library Plaza, Morningside Heights Campus, for Commencement Exercises, marking Columbia University’s 251st academic year. Columbia will graduate approximately 11,000 students from all schools today. Lee C. Bollinger, president of Columbia University, will deliver the commencement address.

Columbia also will grant eight honorary degrees and present the University Medal to Schuyler Low, president of the University from 1899 to 1901, said of the relationship between New York and Columbia: “The great city can teach something that no university by itself can altogether impart.”

This year’s honorees represent a diverse group of national leaders from academia, theater, architecture, the American civil rights movement, the sciences and government. Sterling Professor Emeritus of Political Science at Yale University, Robert A. Dahl, one of the most distinguished political scientists working today, will receive an honorary Doctor of Letters degree. Dahl’s A Preface to Democratic Theory has been recognized by the American Political Science Association for its lasting contribution to the field. His body of books, which spans roughly 20 titles, is a legendary treatise on democracy alone has been translated into more than 20 languages. Dahl received a B.A. from the University of Washington and a Ph.D. from Yale. In 1946, he began teaching at Yale, where he served as professor until his retirement in 1986.

Columbia University Professor Emeritus Henry Franklin Graff, GSAS’49, will receive an honorary Doctor of Letters degree. Graff served as Columbia’s Department of History for 46 years, including a term as chair. His pioneering “Seminar on the Presidency” was one of Columbia’s most popular courses, visited by presidents Harry S Truman and Gerald Ford. As a preeminent presidential historian, Graff regularly provided counsel and advice to presidents Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton.

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