

recollections

Mark Tucker (1954–2000)

By Travis A. Jackson

Mark Tucker was one of those rare individuals who excelled in all the areas one might invoke in assessing a musical scholar's importance. His two books and numerous essays on Duke Ellington and his public presentations on Thelonious Monk have all contributed to our recognition of him as a first-rate musicologist and jazz scholar, one whose work is beautifully written and brimming with insight. His research on Ellington's early years has enhanced our understanding of how one of America's most celebrated composers developed his craft. By situating Ellington in the complex worlds of Washington, D.C. and Harlem up to the 1930s, Mark helped open the door to a more nuanced investigation of jazz, going beyond hagiography or decontextualized musical analysis to render a complex portrait worthy of his subject. His unfinished monograph on Thelonious Monk promised to go in the same direction. A presentation for Columbia's Center for Jazz Studies lecture series in 2000 showed Mark succeeding at disentangling Monk the myth from Monk the musician, and in the process bringing many who thought they understood Monk to a new level of awareness.

Mark's skills went far beyond those of a good writer and researcher. Although the opportunities didn't come enough, those moments when he sat down at the piano to concertize or demonstrate musical concepts were an instructive treat for anyone within earshot. Indeed, one of the most vivid memories I have comes from a farewell party thrown for Mark and his wife Carol in 1997, as they prepared to leave New York for Williamsburg, Virginia. Mark and his onetime roommate, jazz pianist Bruce Barth, improvised a series of deliciously swinging four-hand versions of jazz standards and blues at the piano. These sides of Mark—the thoughtful and elegant writer, the consummate musician—are ones that nearly everyone had the opportunity to see.

Being one of his students during his time at Columbia gave me the opportunity to see a side of Mark whose importance might be easy to underestimate, if only because it was a less public aspect of his day-to-day work as a faculty member. Nearly anyone with an advanced degree has probably had the experience of handing in a term project for which they received little to no feedback beyond a grade and a "good job" (or, worse, "this



reads like a first draft . . .”). With Mark, the experience of getting a paper back was something I eagerly awaited, for what he returned was marked up nearly beyond recognition. Along with copious marginal comments and queries, I received pinpoint copy-editing whose purpose was to make my writing more clear, more direct, and more powerful. Some pages would be filled with balloons around groups of words, each designated with a circled number, that indicated the best possible way to rearrange those elements. I typically describe that experience to my own students as a process of really learning how to write—mastering the skill of saying twice as much in half the space. I would come to understand that his way of responding to student work was a gift extended to his students as it had been extended to him by his mentor at the University of Michigan, Richard Crawford. Likewise, Mark’s classroom demeanor, whether in a lecture or a seminar, was cut from the same cloth: he was less an imparter than a sharer of knowledge, asking questions and opening up issues for further exploration. His main concern was equipping students with the means to generate and answer important questions.

Nearly every day, he showed me the value of having an expansive, open, and giving spirit. A mentor, after all, does more than attend to a mentee’s

intellectual development. Mark did that through introducing me to senior scholars, carting me with him and others to the monthly roundtables at the Institute of Jazz Studies in Newark, and, perhaps most importantly, giving me opportunities to publish and present my work. But beyond that, he shared his love for music and his dry and incisive wit. The time we spent listening to music and recommending recordings to one another was enriching. I remember, for example, a warm spring afternoon when we both sat transfixed in his living room luxuriating in Robin Holcomb's singing on "One of These Days" from Bill Frisell's *Nashville* (his pick) and his e-mailed comment that McCoy Tyner's *Tender Moments* (my pick) was indeed, as many musicians had told me, "a blessed recording."

But one of the most legendary exchanges we had, throughout the spring of 1994, concerned the children's television icon Barney, with whom Mark's son Wynn was fascinated. Our exchange started innocently, but quickly took on a surreal tone—with stories about "the Big Guy" perishing in the La Brea tar pits and being Satan in disguise being traded eagerly. Perhaps the funniest salvo came from Mark after my oral exam on John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme*. Following others, I had speculated that Archie Shepp was the "mystery saxophonist" at the end of the recording. Mark expressed a different view in an e-mail message: "I was really disappointed that the Big Guy's name didn't surface once in your presentation today. Otherwise you did a great job. Some people believe, you know, that it really is Archie Shepp inside that purple costume."

In many ways, it's difficult to summarize the enormous impact Mark has had on me. I learned, right up to the end, so much about what it means to be a responsible and inquisitive scholar and a caring human being from his example. In November 2000, shortly after the "mega-meeting" of music societies in Toronto, I called him to see how he was doing. Through labored breaths, he informed me that he was still working on the Monk book, that he was getting new ideas and really enjoying the process of writing. In the midst of all that was happening, I marveled, he was still at it—working, writing, persevering. When I got the news nearly a month later that he had passed, all I could do was cry: for what his family had lost, for what musicology had lost, and for what I had lost.

I miss him.