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# Jazz piano master Kenny Barron arrives at MSU for week long residency

Feb 10, 2016 | By Keith A. Owens and press reports

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Kenny Barron

Kenny Barron, widely recognized as one of the top jazz pianists in the world, has come to Michigan State University College of Music for a weeklong residency supported by a \$1 million endowment from the MSU Federal Credit Union.

Barron began his MSU residency on Monday, Feb. 8, where he will teach and work with students through the MSUFCU Jazz Artist in Residence program. While in

residence, Barron will instruct, perform and tour with MSU Jazz Octets over a seven-day period packed with workshops and campus concerts. The award-winning artist will also take to the road with MSU Jazz Octets I and II to visit music and jazz programs at public schools and academies in Oxford, East Lansing, Fowlerville, Williamston, Hastings and winding up on Sunday here in Detroit.

"I'm looking forward to hearing the young students," he said.

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Barron, who now teaches at Juilliard in New York, describes his students as “kinda scary actually” when it comes to their level of talent. When asked to compare the younger players of today that he has encountered with those from back in the day when he was a young up and coming musician, he said “I think they’re better prepared than I was at that same age.”

Barron, a native of Philadelphia, has mentored a number of young prodigies who have gone on to make a major impact on the music world, including trumpeter Terrance Blanchard, who now serves as the Jazz Creative Director Chair for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. World-renowned jazz bassist Rodney Whitaker, who has led MSU’s jazz program for the past 16 years, is also a close friend.

“Years ago I used to come to Baker’s Keyboard Lounge with Yusef Lateef,” said Barron, who added that although he hasn’t performed in Detroit in awhile, “I have fond memories. There was a lot of music there.”

Honored as a Jazz Master by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2010, Barron is known for his elegant playing, sensitive melodies and infectious rhythms. The Los Angeles Times named him “one of the top jazz pianists in the world,” and Jazz Weekly calls him “the most lyrical piano player of our time.” Barron consistently wins jazz critic and reader polls, including Downbeat, Jazz Times and Jazziz magazines, and is recognized worldwide as a master of performance and composition.

Barron’s many honors include a Lifetime Achievement Award from Spanish ceramist Lladro in 2012, honorary doctorates from his alma mater SUNY Empire State in 2013 and the Berklee College of Music in 2011 and the Living Legacy Award from the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation in 2009. He was inducted into the American Jazz Hall of Fame, won a MAC Lifetime Achievement Award in 2005 and is a six-time recipient of Best Pianist by the Jazz Journalist Association.

Barron is scheduled to perform two concerts with MSU Jazz Octets led by Davis as well as Jazz Studies faculty Diego Rivera and Randy Napoleon at the Cook Recital Hall in the Music Building on Friday, Feb. 12, at 7 p.m. and at 9:30 p.m. The concerts will also showcase performances of MSU Jazz Octets I, II, III and IV. Whitaker is enthusiastic not only about Barron’s appearance, but more so about the overall impact that the MSU Credit Union’s donation will have on what he is trying to do for young musicians.

“The thing is, a lot of the things that we’re doing now, we have been attempting to do them, in terms of being able to take ensembles across the state, and support fine arts programs and performing arts ..we’ve been trying to do that anyway for the 16 years or so that I’ve run the program. But this makes it a lot easier and the planning a lot better. So being able to have the resources to do it has made it accessible.

“But you know, part of it is our job is we’re trying to raise students who are mission-oriented, and who want to go change the world using jazz. You know, as a tool to teach young folks and really as an agent to bring economic development. I think jazz can do all of that,” he said.

Now in its third year, the innovative jazz residency program continues to attract high-level talent and serves as a model for jazz studies programs nationwide. Pianist Kenny Barron is the third of four critically acclaimed jazz artists in residence for the 2015-16 season.

“One of the things we do, we’re big on outreach,” said Whitaker. “Over the last 16 years we have run outreach programs in Detroit through the Arts League of Michigan, partnering with them, with the Detroit Symphony, and with the Michigan State University Community Music School, and we still have a program there. And then over the last 16 years we have traveled to Japan, and won competitions all over the United States. And performed in New York at Dizzy’s Club Coca Cola. We’ve also, as a program, have brought many, many artists into the community. And this new grant program that we have now, we’re able to take the guest artists out throughout the state and wherever we perform, mostly in high schools, they can charge money for the shows, and they get to keep all the proceeds of the show.

“So imagine your high school, you get Kenny Barron out to your high school, and you can charge money and you can keep the money. So it’s the gift that keeps on giving, you know?”

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Looking back on his time at MSU, Whitaker expressed both pride and gratitude that things have reached this point. As a musician, Whitaker views music – and jazz in particular – not simply as entertainment but as a force capable of elevating communities, and changing the world for the better in the process.

“The biggest thing is when I started there [at MSU], they didn’t have a degree program in jazz studies, so I was able to start a degree program. And also providing access for students to go to college. And not just... primarily in the beginning it started off the mission was really about empowering AA students, and minority students. But ultimately I realized the mission was bigger. Really it’s trying to help raise citizens that want to affect the world in a positive way and want to be able to use music as an agent of change. I mean, that’s really my mission. And done through the use of AA expression in music.

“I think that we underestimate the power of our culture a lot of times. To change the world. I mean, we have anyway. You know, you think about all the great performers that have done this over the years. They’ve changed the world. But I also realized that it’s my job to teach the white kids and the Latino kids too, so that they can do the same thing. Because that’s the only way the world is gonna change is if we try to get everybody to change.

“I think the really powerful thing for me as a Detroiter, is to make sure we’re able to continue to bring our students – the majority of whom now are from out of state – to Detroit so that they can absorb that culture. And making sure people know that I’m 100 percent committed to our city. I love it. It’s my hometown.”

**Schedule: MSUFCU Jazz Artist in Residence Kenny Barron**

Wednesday, Feb. 10, School Visit: Oxford High School

Venue: 7 p.m., Oxford Performing Arts Center, 10 N. Washington St., Oxford, Mich.

Contact: John Hill, 248-969-5000; John.Hill@oxfordschools.org

Website: <http://www.oxfordschools.org>

**Thursday, Feb. 11, School Visits: East Lansing and Fowlerville High Schools**

Venue: 9:40 a.m., East Lansing High School, 509 Burcham Drive, East Lansing, Mich.

Contact: David Larzelere Website: [elps.k12.mi.us](http://elps.k12.mi.us)

Venue: 1:15 p.m., Fowlerville High School, 7677 Sharpe Road, Fowlerville, Mich.

Contact: Bill Vilek, [vliekw@fowlervilleschools.org](mailto:vliekw@fowlervilleschools.org) Website: <http://www.fowlervillebands.com>

**Friday, Feb. 12, School Visit: Williamston Middle School; Performance: College of Music**

Venue: 10:15 a.m., Williamston Middle School, 3845 Vanneter Road, Williamston, Mich.

Contact: MelanieRosin, [rosinm@gowcs.net](mailto:rosinm@gowcs.net) Website: [williamston.mi.schoolwebpages.com](http://williamston.mi.schoolwebpages.com)

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Performances: Jazz Octets, MSU,

Venue: 7 p.m. and 9:30 p.m., Jazz Octet I-IV Concert, Two performance times; MSU College of Music, Cook Recital Hall, 333 W.Circle Drive, East Lansing, Mich.

**Saturday, Feb. 13, School Visit: Hastings, Mich.**

Venue: 7 p.m., First Presbyterian Church of Hastings, 405 M-37, Hastings, Mich.

Contact: Spencer White, 269-945-5463; swhite@hassk12.org Website: saxonbands.weebly.com

**Sunday, Feb. 14, School Visit: Detroit, Mich.**

Venue: 7 p.m., Carr Center, 311 E. Grand River Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Contact: Oliver Ragsdale, 313-965-8430; oliver@thecarrcenter.org Website:

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