

In Memoriam: Prof Fielder

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Trumpeter and educator William Butler Fielder (1938–2009) was a Meridian, Mississippi, native and a musical king maker. “Prof,” as he was affectionately known, hailed from a musical family. His mom, a Fisk Jubilee Singer, played violin and piano; his dad played coronet; his older brother, Alvin, plays drums.

Al recalls, “At age 9, Bill studied piano and soon switched to my dad’s 1920 CG Conn cornet. Mother made sure Bill had private lessons with William Davis, a Jackson State professor who played in Cab Calloway’s band with Dizzy. Bill attended Tugaloo Prep, a private boarding school, where the good habits he learned from my parents and Davis were reinforced. Dad wanted Bill to become a physician, but Mother supported Bill’s desires. Bill was a dedicated master musician.”

Prof briefly attended Tennessee State University (TSU) then transferred to Chicago’s American Conservatory of Music and earned a master’s degree. His goal was to join the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO). In 1957, he arrived at Orchestra Hall, introduced himself to Adolf Herseth, CSO’s principal trumpet, and played the Haydn concerto from memory.

Herseth fondly remembers, “Bill was a very advanced student with an open mind who worked diligently and consistently absorbed as much as he could mentally, physically, and spiritually to create the best music possible.” Prof’s audition landed him in the first chair of CSO’s Civic Orchestra’s trum-

pet section. Prof spent his college days learning the “Chicago sound” from Herseth; from Vincent Cichowicz—his primary teacher and CSO’s assistant principal trumpet; and from Arnold Jacob, CSO’s principal tuba. At the core of the big, round “Chicago sound” are diaphragmatic breathing, consistent air flow, and increased mouthpiece bore. Years later in lessons and master classes, Prof taught air flow and embouchure concepts by holding a sheet of paper against a wall—from several arm’s length away—using air blown from his lips (often while tonguing a tune).

Prof’s college nights were spent jamming in a home that his parents bought for him and Al at 5941 South Sangamon. The Sangamon flat was the site of jam sessions that attracted local jazz musicians and groups that passed through Chicago: from Sun Ra—in whose band Al was the drummer—to Art Blakey, Bill Lee, Jack DeJohnette, Betty Dupree, Shirley Scott, Booker Little, and others. When Prof joined Sun Ra’s band for a West Coast tour, he met Freddy Hubbard (who later studied with Prof), Wes Montgomery, Alonzo “Pookie” Johnson, and Lee Morgan—who was responsible for Blakey offering Prof a job. Prof’s mother made him turn down the Blakey gig to finish school.

After graduating, Prof taught in historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in Tennessee, Mississippi, Texas, North Carolina, and Alabama. His students at Alabama State include percussionist Michael Adams and trumpeter Dr. George Shaw. Prof was Adams’ percussion ensemble director and observes that

A few rehearsals were devoted to the downbeat of the first measure in a composition. Prof was not satisfied with the sloppy attack of the first note. He was determined to make us sound like an ensemble. As a result Prof made lifelong enemies and friends.

Often Prof came to our dorm and woke us up to listen to CSO recordings of Mahler. He taught me how to listen, exposed me to orchestral and jazz literature, and made me a better musician and drummer.

Shaw remembers,

My world consisted of Enterprise, Pinckard, and Ozark, Alabama. Prof taught us that while we were deficient, we didn’t have to remain so. He was a proper gentleman who taught us etiquette, how to thrive, set up a routine, and strive for perfection. I had the same lesson for four years because I did not master page one. Prof encouraged me to play bass and got me bass work. Before gigs he’d say, “Go have some fun: hit ’em hard, wish ’em well, cause you can’t suck ’em [notes] back.”

After undergrad he drove me to Wayne State, met my teachers and helped set up my master’s program; he did the same for my doctoral program at Oklahoma. For my dissertation, at

Prof's suggestion (instead of doing library research) I interviewed Eddie Harris, Clark Terry, Dizzy, Milt Hinton, Lionel Hampton, Cab Calloway, et al. Later these guys came to Long Beach City College and did concerts with me. They helped me gain credibility, thanks to Prof.

Prof returned to TSU as assistant band director. A colleague, Professor Johnny Lane, recalls,

At the first rehearsal Prof collected the brass mouthpieces, threw them away, and had each player buy a specific Bach mouthpiece. He took a drill and increased the bore of each mouthpiece. Instantly the band sounded ten times its actual size!

Prof wore a jacket and tie and demanded the same of his students. As a result, I set a dress code for percussion students that included brief cases to carry sticks, music dictionaries, manuscript paper, and scores. Like Prof, I had students copy excerpts as a way of learning them.

Under Prof's tutelage, Dr. Leon Richard was the youngest member of the Nashville Symphony Orchestra when he was still an undergrad. Richard believes,

Had Prof not come into our lives, we would be lost. All our achievements can be traced to Prof. He exposed us to classic readings, writers, and thinkers. Concepts Prof learned from Herse, Cichowicz, and Jacobs are not taught in the academy. I loved his generosity, dedication, and love for music. He elevated black students, often at the price of being mistreated by HBCU's that were preoccupied with marching band; versus Prof's holistic approach.

Prof inspired me to earn a doctorate, teach at Kentucky State and play with the Lexington Symphony Orchestra. He taught me that "Trumpet is the mirror of the mind: everything has a concept that stems from a mental approach." Everything we do effects the music we create and vice versa.

Shaw University colleague, Professor Larry Ridley inspired Prof to move to Rutgers, where he spent thirty years teaching students who are forging careers as jazz and classical musicians. Prof's protégés include Thara Memory, Wynton Marsalis, Terence Blanchard, Danny Harper (Church Hill Downs jam sessions), Mitchell Hollie, Tyree Blanton, Phillip Harper (a trumpeter living in Amsterdam), Daniel Kassteen (Louisville Symphony Orchestra), Terrell Stafford (Temple University, Carnegie Hall Big Band), Sean Jones (Duquesne University), Professor Derrick Gardner (Michigan State University), Ralph Peterson (trumpeter, drummer), Jeff Rupert and Eric Wright (University of Central Florida), Michael Mossman (CUNY, Queens), Anja Christine Nielsen, and Lee Hogan.

Prof was known for his words of wisdom and scholarly reading. Jessie Robinson regarded Prof as "a complete work who exposed me to mysticism, which led to my first trip to Egypt." Dr. Travis Heath (Northeastern Illinois University) remembers Prof saying, "Air in the trumpet should be executed like a bow on the violin." Prof turned Danny Harper on to Maurice Andre and insisted that he read *The Third Eye*.

Daniel Terence Harper, Danny's son, studied with Prof and was among Prof's last students at Rutgers. The younger Harper began playing drums at age two and later switched to trumpet. Like generations before him, Harper ate dinner with Prof almost every night. "Prof ate, slept, and breathed music, trumpet and learning. He expected a lot from me because of who my dad is. Prof was like a grandfather to me. He was very intense and strict. The four-and-a-half years I spent with him are legendary."

Prof's memorial services were held on October 13, 2009, at Rutgers' Kirkpatrick Chapel. A concert followed at Nicholas Music Center, then an event called "Jammin' for Prof" at Steakhouse 85. Featured protégés and colleagues included Wynton Marsalis and Columbia College Chicago's Jon Faddis. Marsalis remarked, "Prof took me under his wing at age thirteen and mentored me until the day he passed."

Before he died, Prof took stock of his life with this writer. Prof's legacy includes *The Complete Book of Jazz Improvisation* (1980, with Howard Harris); his debut headliner album, *A Love Progression* (1985, Prescription label); *Baroque Duet* with Wynton Marsalis and Kathleen Battle (1992, PBS); clinic on Hummel Concerto with Wynton Marsalis (Morristown, N.J., 1995); *Jazz Experience* (New York's UPN, WWOR-TV, 2000); and a feature on Lionelle Hamanaka's 2002 CD, *Jazz Bouquet*.

Prof performed with Duke Ellington, B. B. King, Mulgrew Miller, Cedar Walton, Kenny Barron, Philly Joe Jones, Frank Foster, Charlie Rouse, and others, as well as with CSO's Chicago Civic Orchestra and the Nashville Symphony Orchestra. Prof served triple duty teaching jazz trumpet, classical trumpet jazz history, and harmony at Rutgers.

Rutgers music department vice chair and chair of brass Dr. Scott Whitener holds Prof in the highest esteem:

He was my best friend: a great artist and wonderful teacher whom I knew twenty-eight years. Life will never be the same without him. Prof had an encyclopedic knowledge of jazz and classical music literature, history, and theory. (I believe he had a photographic memory.)

Prof was one of the most optimistic people I know; even in the face of serious obstacles: asthma from birth, devastating glaucoma at age thirty-two, losing his teeth a decade ago, and lung cancer.

Prof never received credit for being the first trumpet player in history to play classical and jazz at the highest level. He was a pioneer who showed this could be done. A brilliant line of students will carry Prof's example forward, showing and telling their students what he gave them, "You may be gratified, but never satisfied."