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Self-taught musician plays tunes and all that jazz

By LAURIE KIRKLAND
Correspondent

The first — and so far, the last — formal musical training Bernie Jacobs Jr. had was when he played the clarinet in his elementary school band.

"I couldn't stand it," he said. "They didn't play jazz."

Jacobs, a 41-year-old Portsmouth resident, is a professional jazz flutist who taught himself how to play when he was a fine arts major at

Norfolk State University in the 1960s.

He did so by buying a book of fingerings and playing to himself. He plays for a slightly larger audience now in and around the region, has performed in several other U.S. cities, and has even been featured in a locally produced specially aired show about four years ago on WHRO-TV public television.

"I picked up the flute as sort of an amusement to myself primarily," he recalled. "I just liked the

sound of the instrument."

His father, Bernie Jacobs Sr., now associate pastor of Jerusalem Baptist Church in Norfolk, played the guitar and piano. The younger Jacobs grew up listening to music and singing in church "and on the corner with the fellas." When he was older and a junior at Booker T. Washington High School in Norfolk, he started listening to jazz.

"I've always been into the more esoteric things," he said, "... and to a certain degree, being deliber-

ately weird. . . . Jazz was one of my hip things."

Once he started listening to jazz, he said, he knew he had to start playing it. "It was like going to a dance and not knowing how to dance," he said. "You were just standing around."

Jacobs, who moved to Olde Towne from Norfolk's Ghent, was majoring in art at Norfolk State University — it was late 1963 — when he decided to teach himself how to play the flute. He had al-

ways liked the instrument, but it took the late multi-instrumentalist Roland Kirk's "muscular style" on the flute, Jacobs said, to convince him that the instrument didn't have to be effeminate.

"I was always sort of a Bohemian type of guy," he said. "The flute went with beatniks and black turtlenecks."

He just didn't have time to take lessons, so he bought "a flute book"

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to learn the fingerings and started playing as much as 12 hours a day.

"I would almost black out from hyperventilating," he said.

What he worked so hard to develop was a good tone. "I like a full, rich sound — like a classical sound," he said. "Some people are anxious to develop technique rather than sound."

"There are a lot of people who play very technically correct things... (but) they're just babbling."

Jacobs' teachers were the professional musicians who played on the many records albums he collected. (He has about 2,000 now) Because he didn't read music well, he learned songs by listening to them until he could play them by ear.

He was especially impressed with famed trumpeter Miles Davis. "I know the first time I heard Miles (Davis), he could do more with a few notes than most musicians could do with a lot," Jacobs said.

Flutist Herbie Mann, he said, taught him "not to be afraid to be a little showy" and musicians like saxophonist Dexter Gordon taught him that music has to "swing."

He had been playing the flute for six months to a year when a friend

offered Jacobs a spot in a jazz band headed for Harrisburg, Pa. He left school in 1967 to spend two weeks with the band and didn't come back to Norfolk until 1972. By that time he had played with various bands in Washington, D.C., Pittsburgh and at Lake Tahoe.

He had also taught himself how to play the saxophone.

Jacobs now plays the alto and tenor saxophones, the flute and a host of percussion instruments ranging from cowbells to conga drums.

The WHRO-TV special, which featured him in a live setting, came about when he was playing with area guitarist Woody Becker in the Becker-Jacobs Group.

"I think we were simply invited to do it," Jacobs said.

"We were very popular," he said straight-faced. "We worked an average of five or six nights a weeks for roughly a year and a half... and we had a nice mixture of music. I'd sing a few tunes, pop and blues — kind of Al Jarreau-type things, some Stevie Wonder tunes."

It was a nice break for him, said Jacobs, recalling that it got him more exposure. "People came up from Nags Head because they'd seen the show. People would call

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me long distance to see where I was playing. They'd say, 'We're coming that way and we wanted to see you play after seeing you on that show.'"

Jacobs was a full-time musician before coming to the Chrysler Museum as an art preparator about six years ago. He likes the idea of having a steady job and income. "Now, if I don't play, it doesn't bother me as much financially," Jacobs said.

He had gotten a little tired of the nomadic life. "I'm a family-type person. I like going to clubs, but I

don't like being on the road, especially with an unknown group."

At the museum, Jacobs is one of six preparators — "the hands-on people," as he calls them.

He helps to move the museum's artwork, sometimes travels to pick up works from out-of-town museums, even builds frames and paints the galleries.

In his off hours, he performs regularly around town in a duo with a bassist or guitarist or a quartet with a bassist, guitarist and drummer.

His repertoire includes "a lot of Gershwin tunes, a lot of jazz standards. Even 'Dr. Feelgood' by Aretha Franklin, "although I change the gender."

He frequently plays at the Judges Chambers in downtown Norfolk. Starting Monday, he'll play the Colony Cabaret on Portsmouth's High Street.

A recent Wednesday night found him playing with guitarist Bob Roetker at the Judges Chambers in Norfolk.

Sometimes clear, mellow notes poured from Jacobs' flute; other times, he played harmonics, two notes at a time, that echoed more thickly, like the hum of a melody played over the rim of a pop bottle.

Laying his flute aside, Jacobs picked up the microphone and moved easily into a "sho-be-do-bo-de-be" scat singing versions of "Bye Bye Blackbird." Microphone

in his right hand, the gestures with his left, cigarette dangling from his outstretched fingers.

Jacobs sang with Top 40s' groups from 1972 to 1979, so he is equally at ease singing and playing. In fact, singing was sometimes easier when he played with a group, he said, because it isn't as necessary to read music to sing.

Jacobs' voice vacillates between a low tenor and baritone. "I'm a confident singer," he said. "I know what I can do."

His favorite performers include singers like Carmen McRae and Aretha Franklin and musicians like Sonny Rollins, Dexter Gordon and Chick Corea.

Jacobs said he reads music, but

"very poorly." When he performed on the road, he always brought his stereo along so he could learn the band's music by ear.

Jacobs said if his son, Bernie III, 4, decides to study music, he will see to it that he studies music. "Because it doesn't hurt to have a certain amount of musicianship," he said.

But the most important thing about playing music, he said, "is loving playing. . . . I'm all for loving what you're doing and really caring about what you do to the point where you learn something about it."

"It's always gratifying when someone comes up to you and says, 'Hey, I like what you're doing.'"