

Wilbur Witteman: Jazz Spectacular

By Pat Johnson

Wilbur Witteman is a Jazz man extraordinaire. He plays jazz, teaches jazz and promotes jazz throughout Ocean County and beyond. Through the Ocean County Board of Commissioners he brings his orchestras, jazz ensembles, Dixieland bands and his conducting skills to audiences both young and old and takes teaching the art of jazz very seriously.

He gives between 50 and 60 jazz workshops to junior and high school students every year. “After marching band season, the schools gear up for jazz season,” he explained. “Teachers are looking for help in choosing music, in teaching jazz and even class discipline.”

In the spring he holds a Music Spectacular Jazz Festival,

a 14-hour intensive day of jazz for students that was started by Franklin Fisher of the Ocean County Parks and Recreation department. This 26th year it was held in April at the Maria Ressa auditorium in Toms River North High School. “I bring in famous jazz artists to play for the kids and then various school music directors bring their students to play a selection for me, one band at a time and if they want a critique, we give suggestions on how to improve their performance,” explained Witteman.

“It’s more than just them playing, some don’t know how to play jazz, they come from a more classical background. Syncopation and learning the rhythms of

jazz is difficult for some. We show them how to make it more ‘jazzy’ how to improvise and also how to take a solo. They learn to play off each other’s energy—that what makes its special. It’s like teaching them a foreign language, but one that was created in America! Once they understand the performance aspects of jazz, they have fun.”

Witteman notes that there are not many classes in college for teachers to learn how to teach jazz. “Some of the kids in the groups have gone on to become music teachers and then they bring their students to me - It’s self-perpetuating.”

Big band music is also on the wane as more and more seniors pass on, but it’s another American type of music that deserves to survive. Every August Witteman facilitates a week-long Big Band Boot Camp for professional musicians from all over the country that culminates in two free concerts, this year on August 22 at the Ocean County Library in Toms River and August 23 at the Ocean County Parks and Recreation administration building. Witteman also provides and conducts bands with ten different styles of music—Dixieland, tribute bands, Big Bands in size up to 40 musicians for the Ocean County Carousel of Music at various venues throughout the summer. He contracts with musicians from all walks including string musicians from the Philadelphia Orchestra, Trenton Symphony and the Philly Pops.

Witteman credits Franklin Fisher for starting the Carousel of Music and the coordinator of the Carousel of Music concert series Brianna Costigan for keeping it vital and in particular, Ocean County Cultural and Heritage Commission for funding jazz workshops in schools. With school budgets tightening, it’s often music and art programs that get cut, notes Witteman. The jazz music workshops allow Witteman to have a positive effect on the music program. Recently, the Lacey district was able to raise enough funds to hire back a music teacher.

This year, Witteman has the honor of serving as managing director of the National Jazz Festival held March 22, 2025 in the Philadelphia Convention Center. It’s a huge undertaking, said Witteman, with



Wilbur Witteman, Big Band Boot Camp.
Photo credit: Wilbur Witteman.

1,400 students coming from 18 states, starting in 65 ensembles both instrumental and vocal. Each ensemble will perform three songs to be critiqued by the judges—famous jazz musicians. At the end of the day, the best are invited to play as the All Stars at an evening performance.

Witteman performs on cornet, trumpet and flugelhorn. He is a graduate of Lakewood High School and as a kid studied trumpet with Lew Soloff (of the band ‘Blood, Sweat and Tears.’) He went to Westchester University, where he directed the university jazz ensemble. Upon graduation he taught at the College of New Jersey and at Georgian Court University where he was named Director of Bands and Director of Jazz studies. He retired from this sterling 28-year career in 2016. Along the way, he played professionally with many world famous musicians and orchestras including Dizzy Gillespie, Maynard Ferguson, Arturo Sanduval, Jose Feliciano, Little Anthony, the Glen Miller, Artie Shaw and Jimmy Dorsey Orchestras –to name a few.

“Perpetuating the art form of jazz is my main goal in life and I do that by teaching children and adults,” he said. Witteman also teaches all levels of musical instruction privately or in group sessions. Contact Witteman through his website Wilbur@wworchestras.com

6th Annual National Jazz Festival

March 22, 2025

Pennsylvania Convention Center
Philadelphia, PA