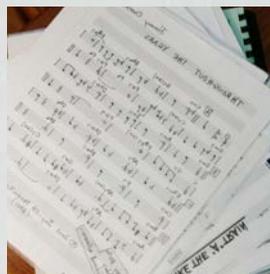


PHOTOS: AMY & JACKSON SMITH





Hitting the right note

***Jazz legend Roland Wiggins
reflects on a lifetime of musical
expression*** By Erin O'Hare

Roland Wiggins taught his first music lesson when he was in elementary school. He was about 10 years old, and his music teacher, Helen Derrick, had written a series of notes and chord intervals on the chalkboard. As the lesson progressed, Wiggins noticed that Derrick had made a mistake.

"Excuse me, Ms. Derrick. You've made an error," the boy said from his desk. "What you told us just doesn't work, really, musically."

Derrick replied, "Now, wait a minute. I'm going to check all my theories and check all the books, and if I come back and you're right, I'll bring you an ice cream cone."

Half-reclining on a formal sofa in his Charlottesville living room (which also doubles as his practice studio, with an upright piano and clavichord in one corner), Wiggins, now 87, interlocks his fingers behind his head and looks up toward the ceiling as he remembers the scene. "Ms. Derrick was going to be a better music teacher than most. I wasn't being mean, that's just what I felt," he says, then laughs quietly before ending the story.

Next music class, he says, eyes smiling, everyone got a vanilla ice cream cone.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

Wiggins still loves vanilla ice cream best, and he's built his love for music, and music education, into an astonishing career that's included teaching everyone from Philadelphia public school students to John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk. A resident of Charlottesville since 1989, Wiggins is one of the foremost music theorists and logicians of our time.

His approach to music and music theory, which he calls the "atonal method," or, more casually, "the Wiggins," allows musicians to better express themselves by breaking the rules of Western tonal music. It's about, among many other things, avoiding clichés, infusing original compositions with more individuality, or giving a singular voice to a standard piece. It's about communicating honestly.

By the time Wiggins corrected his music teacher's work, he'd already been playing and studying piano for a few years.

Wiggins says that his mother "played church music very well," and practiced regularly on the Wiggins' family piano. It wasn't a great piano, he recalls—it was missing a few keys, and some of the others didn't make a sound. But this imperfect instrument may actually have enhanced Wiggins' innate musical abilities.

One day, Wiggins' mother told him he'd be playing music at church the following Sunday. "Well, Mom, I would probably make a lot of mistakes," he said to her, looking over at the flawed piano.

A stern glance from Wiggins' father said that Wiggins would indeed play music at church the following Sunday. "So what I did was, to learn the pitches that were missing, and put them here," says Wiggins, pointing to his ear. He played that Sunday, and kept practicing. "And there came a time when the whole keyboard became friends rather than enemies, or matters of ignorance."

Throughout junior high and high school, he took private lessons as well as classes at the Philadelphia Conservatory of Music, including some from highly regarded classical composer Vincent Persichetti. Wiggins then enrolled in Combs College of Music in Philadelphia, where, about a week or so into classes, he was invited to join the faculty. Over the course of eight years, Wiggins attended Combs part-time, earning undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degrees while simultaneously teaching music in Philadelphia public schools.

Wiggins then left Philadelphia for New York, where he studied composition and advanced chord theory with Henry Cowell, regarded by many as one of the most innovative composers in 20th century American music. (Cowell is perhaps best known for his development and use of "tone clusters," in which a pianist plays multiple adjacent keys on the keyboard at once, often with the forearm, to achieve a certain sonorous sound.)

Somewhere in there, he served in the U.S. Air Force and played in a band with famed jazz and R&B trumpeter Donald Byrd (Wiggins says he taught Byrd about embellishments, musical flourishes on a melody or harmony in the form of added notes).

In a distinguished and varied career, Wiggins has been director of the Center for the Study of Aesthetics in Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (1971-1973); a music teacher and choral director for Amherst Regional Junior High School (1976-1979); and an associate professor of music at Hampshire College in Amherst. He later chaired the Luther P. Jackson House for African American Studies at the University of Virginia, and taught a few classes in UVA's music department while he was at it.

At the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, he conducted grant-funded research into advancements in electronic music production and helped create the Sound to Score translator device, which used computerized analyses of world famous jazz musicians to teach music.

And there were opportunities he did not take: In 1971, for instance, Harvard psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce requested that Wiggins interview for the position of director of the Urban Studies Center at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a post that came with a full professorship. The committee felt Wiggins' approach to digital music education could "serve as a model in numerous institutional programs," Pierce wrote, adding, "Your own ability as a jazz and classical musician was mentioned to me by Mr. Quincy Jones, a musician of international stature, who praised your handling of the philosophical, educational and research components of the Institute of Black American Music."

Yes, *that* Quincy Jones, producer to Frank Sinatra, Michael Jackson, and Aretha Franklin, among others. Wiggins got to know him through Jesse Jackson, who tapped Wiggins to serve as a charter member on the board of directors for his Operation P.U.S.H. (People United to Save Humanity). For the record, "Q" wanted to study music with Wiggins, too, but Wiggins' queue of students was already full.

Wiggins turned down the Harvard interview. It didn't pay as much as UMass Amherst, and by that time he had a family—his wife,

Muriel, and their three daughters—to consider. But he was proud to be asked, and keeps the letter in a plastic sleeve inside a binder alongside some of his most prized photographs and sheet music.

Wiggins' list of accomplishments goes on and on, and might fill the allotted word count for this story. But in talking with Wiggins for even a few minutes, it's clear that while he's accomplished quite a bit in his life—musically, academically, culturally—he's not doing it for the accolades.

"I've got awards and stuff, that I don't hang on the wall," he says. His walls are instead full of large-scale abstract paintings by one of his Air Force buddies; a portrait of his three daughters, Rosalyn, Susan, and Carol; a few family photos; and other items close to his heart. Atop his piano are family photographs, lamps, cassette tapes, and small clocks, rather than trophies and citations. When Wiggins talks about what he's accomplished, he speaks not of his awards, but his students.

"I've had a lot of students. Either directly, or indirectly," he says, smiling. Some of them just happen to be some of the greatest and most influential jazz musicians of all time. Yusef Lateef. Billy Taylor. Archie Shepp via Jimmy Owens. John Coltrane, unhappy with what he'd come up with after the monumental success of both *Giant Steps* (1960) and *A Love Supreme* (1965), called Wiggins for guidance.

"I said, 'first of all, John, give yourself credit for the mastery that you've already developed and the contributions you've made,'" Wiggins says. Their phone call was cut short, but another of Wiggins'

"And there came a time when the whole keyboard became friends rather than enemies, or matters of ignorance."

students, Charlottesville-based musician and restaurateur Jay Pun, says it's generally understood that Coltrane-Wiggins phone call influenced much of what Coltrane did on *Interstellar Space*, recorded in 1967 (the year Coltrane died) and released in 1974.

Charlottesville-based guitarist Jamal Millner saw Wiggins' influence on these stars firsthand. Millner, perhaps best known as a member of the Corey Harris-led blues band 5x5, studied music at UVA in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was a great era for jazz in Charlottesville, he says, and a lot of jazz greats came to town to play at Old Cabell Hall. Millner, who was playing music professionally even before going to college, would sometimes loiter backstage and listen to the stars discuss technique and theory. Wiggins was usually there, too.

During one show, legendary jazz drummer Max Roach gave Wiggins a shoutout from the stage, and it nearly blew Millner's mind. "The highest level of jazz musicians were always giving Dr. Wiggins his props," he says.

So, what exactly are they giving him props for? Wiggins giggles when he explains what he's been working on in his decades-long music theory career. "I keep laughing and giggling," he says, "because I've developed a system of atonality. That means, it purposely breaks all the rules of Western tonal music." (Most music in Western cultures is tonal.)

He gets up from the sofa and goes over to the clavino (a digital piano) to demonstrate. His system has to do with, among many other things, added tone systems; embellishments; sets of chords and their behaviors; how the end of one musical entity (a chord, or a rhythm, for instance), is immediately or simultaneously the beginning of another one. It's hard to explain in words, but easy to hear. Wiggins gets on the clavino and demonstrates how his system of atonality can expand the emotional and intellectual capacity of a composition.

"So, if you're angry at, say, some of the racism, or some of the more offensive mechanisms that are still around in society, you can't express that musically and be truthful" when you're playing something upbeat and proper, he says as he plays a measure. "But if you do the Wiggins atonality," he says, his fingers floating over the keys, playing that same measure in a different voice, one with more tones, more notes, more variation, and as a result, more feeling. "It's not easy to sing, but I'm expressing something real, some rage, honestly," he says.

It's a way to get to know someone. "Have you heard this one?" Wiggins asks before launching into "What A Wonderful World," Wiggins-style. Of course I have; it's part of the Great American Songbook. But I haven't heard it like this. Not from the perspective of a black man born in Ocean City, New Jersey, during the Great Depression, who was a musical prodigy by age 10. Who, growing up in a segregated United States, was not allowed to swim in the local public pool except on Fridays, just before it was cleaned for the week.

I haven't heard "What A Wonderful World" from the perspective of someone whose family was only allowed to buy a home near the railroad tracks. Not from the perspective of a brilliant mind who was told by the dean of UMass that he was being hired "because he was black, and a scholar," not because he was a scholar who was also black (Wiggins asked him to reverse that statement).

Next, he plays Thelonious Monk and, with a wry smile on his face, says that since Monk's not here to tell him otherwise, "let's help ourselves" to "Round Midnight." He adds "the Wiggins" to Monk, builds upon his friend's composition, makes it his own.

He's had two surgeries on his hands, he tells me as he leaves Monk behind, those very hands still dancing over the black and white keys. But at the time, he'd fallen in love with a piece full of tenths, a piece that required both hands to play. "Ah, Chopin!" he declares. "Takes me back to Combs College! Cadence. Deceptive. All running up and down the keyboard. They're instrumental forms, and not every musician uses the same ones others do," he explains.



The Wiggins system is about individual, truthful expression and communication through music. It's what he aims to share with his students, so that they in turn may share it with their own students and listeners.

It's an approach to teaching, playing, and writing music that has changed the work, and the lives, of a number of local musicians who've worked closely with Wiggins over the years.

"I'll say this about Charlottesville," says Millner. "There are a lot of great musicians around. But Dr. Wiggins? He's a person that, for most folks, only exists in theory. But he's *here*. Talented, intelligent, and a very nice guy. In all the ways he's great at music, he's great as a person."

For Millner, as well as other area musicians like Morwenna Lasko and her husband and collaborator Jay Pun, living in such close proximity to Wiggins has allowed them to mine the depths of the theorist's brilliant mind and big heart in ways that folks like John Coltrane simply could not.

Pun first heard of Wiggins through his friend and musical mentor LeRoi Moore, saxophonist and founding member of Dave Matthews Band, who arranged music around Matthews' song skeletons. Every time Pun visited Moore's farm outside of town, the two would have the same conversation.

"Do you know Wiggins?," Moore would ask.

"No, who's that?," Pun would say.

"He's a music theorist, and he will blow your mind!"

"Whatever, Roi," Pun would reply. Pun graduated from Berklee College of Music, so what more could another music theorist have to teach him?

When Moore died of pneumonia after being seriously injured in an ATV accident in 2008, Wiggins played at his funeral. But still, Pun had his doubts.

After a chance meeting while waiting in line to see Barack Obama at the Sprint Pavilion in 2011, Pun gave Wiggins a call: He was a friend of LeRoi's, and he wanted to take a lesson. But before Wiggins would accept him as a student, Pun had to pass a test.

"What's in a C diminished chord?" Wiggins asked.

"C, E flat, G flat, B double flat," said Pun.

"Is that all?" Wiggins inquired.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 25



TOP: A young Roland Wiggins (center) poses with his mother, older sister, and older brother. Wiggins, who grew up in Ocean City, New Jersey, was a musical prodigy by age 10. In addition to his many accomplishments, he is one of just a few people authorized to teach the Schillinger System of Musical Composition, a method based on mathematics and encompassing theories of rhythm, harmony, melody, counterpoint, form, and semantics (emotional meaning). MIDDLE: During his stint in the military, Wiggins, seen here at the piano, played in an Air Force band. Among his many bandmates was famed jazz and R&B trumpeter and vocalist Donald Byrd. BOTTOM: Wiggins (right) and legendary pop music producer Quincy Jones embrace at a fundraiser for Tandem Friends School in the mid-1990s. Wiggins and Jones met in the 1970s, via Jesse Jackson's Operation P.U.S.H. (People United to Save Humanity). At the time, Wiggins was running a program at the University of Massachusetts focused on recruiting notable African Americans to advanced degree programs, and "Q" expressed interest in enrolling.

PHOTOS COURTESY ROLAND WIGGINS

Pun paused, tentatively offered up a few more options, and Wiggins told him to call back when he knew for sure. His pride bruised, Pun decided it wasn't worth it. And yet, he had to know what Wiggins knew about the C diminished chord, that he didn't.

Pun did his research, called Wiggins back the following day with a better answer: C, E flat, G flat, and B double flat are the consonant tones, but each chord has even more dissonant notes, like ninths, elevenths, and thirteenth. That's what Wiggins wanted to hear, and so they set up a lesson: One hour, for \$50. That hour turned into three, almost four. Then it turned in to another lesson, and another.

Once Pun started learning "this note goes with that note because of this," and "this note combined with those note sounds like this because of this," the number of people buying his records and attending his live shows mattered less and less to him. Under Wiggins' tutelage, Pun says that for him, music transformed into a world worth exploring, rather than just a product to promote.

Lasko took her first lesson with Wiggins in spring 2013, a birthday gift from Pun. Lasko started playing violin at age 3, after seeing Itzhak Perlman play on "Sesame Street." Her musical gifts were evident from the start—she'd often retreat to her room to figure out a "Masterpiece Theater" theme—and she knew early on that music is how she best expresses herself, how she best relates to people.

Lasko is classically trained and highly skilled (she can play Paganini caprices, considered "the ultimate" in technical accomplishment), but she was nervous for her first Wiggins lesson. She arrived early and sat in her car in the driveway to compose herself before ringing the bell.

Once she was inside, though, at the piano with Wiggins, her nerves mostly subsided. She'd gained not just a teacher, but a friend, and the lessons were "magic." They talked theory and played pieces like Billy Taylor's "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel To Be Free," and Thad Jones' "A Child Is Born" to get to know one another. As with Pun, Lasko's one-hour lessons were almost always longer, but Wiggins never charged more than the \$50.

Early on in their lessons, Lasko and Wiggins noticed that deer would often come up to the French doors in the living room and listen in on what they were doing on violin and piano, respectively. Lasko's convinced it's the late, great jazz artists stopping by to hear what they're doing, to continue learning from Wiggins.

Wiggins' theories and methods "[give] you so much more juicy vocabulary to use" when expressing oneself through music, she says.

He's also helped her to realize her own musical tendencies and clichés. Musicians get comfortable with what they know, says Lasko, and they'll slip back into the same chord progressions or familiar melodies. But Wiggins helped her see that identifying and recognizing that comfort zone, and then stepping outside of it, is where a musician can grow. While recording *The Hollow*, her latest release with Pun as MoJa, Lasko wrote her violin solos, listened to them, decided "that sounds so Morwenna," and then re-wrote them to be almost the opposite of what they were...and they're now some of her favorite solos.

Many musicians, once they reach a certain point of virtuosity, think there's nothing more to learn, says Lasko. But there's always something to discover, and Wiggins leads by example. While recovering from a hip surgery in a rehabilitation facility, Lasko and Pun brought Wiggins a keyboard so that he could play music for his fellow patients (often accompanied by his wife singing), and so that he could work late into the night on his theories.

After Berklee, Lasko wondered what she would practice that would continue to inspire her. The answer, it turns out, is music theory, and Wiggins' atonal method in particular. "That language is so vast and broad," she says. "The more you know of it, the more you can say, the more you can communicate with others. The more I build my language of music theory, the more powerful I feel. The Western tonal system of music will only take you so far, as far as expressing things. And that's why Dr. Wiggins is a genius in certain aspects, because he's tried to undo it."

"I have notebooks full of stuff that I will literally be digesting for my entire life," says Lasko. "It's almost like life is too short, like you need 10 lives, or 25, to really learn all there is to learn."

But, says Wiggins, Lasko's doing a pretty fantastic job. "I just adore her. If I were to die tomorrow morning, the person that would know so much of what I've taught to do, would be Morwenna."

And that's a very good thing: Lasko teaches private lessons to students of all ages here in Charlottesville, sharing some of that Wiggins knowledge with a whole new generation of musicians.

This Saturday night, Wiggins will give a somewhat rare concert during A Night of Black Innovation in Music at the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center.



PHOTOS: AMY & JACKSON SMITH

In a Facebook post about the show, Wiggins wrote, "The opportunity to help preserve and extend the life of Afro-American arts, especially music, is tremendously exciting for me." He'll perform alongside a slew of local black artists, including pianist and composer Ivan Orr, singer Yolonda Coles Jones, neo-soul artist Nathaniel Star, and others. Some of his beloved students—including Lasko, Pun, and Millner—will perform as well.

Proceeds from ticket sales will benefit the future Eko Ise performance, music theory, and education program at the Jefferson School, something that, of course, is close to Wiggins' heart.

Lasko and Pun say Wiggins is always talking about ways to get a music theory program, especially one geared toward black children, started here in town. Because music is a language to be used for self-expression, Wiggins is particularly committed to getting that idea into the minds of black children, perhaps, he says, because that was his own experience. Music, and music theory, not only gave him opportunities, it gave him a way to express himself fully, in a world that was, and often still is, not kind to black self expression.

When I ask Wiggins what he hopes his legacy will be, he gets up from the couch for what must be the tenth time in two hours, and walks to the stand up piano. He takes a black plastic cassette player from the top and rifles through a stack of tapes. This one's Billy Taylor's, he says, and sets it aside. The next one is Thelonious Monk, working through a piece for him. He sets that one aside, too. The third tape in the stack is the one he's after, the one with a pink label.

Wiggins returns to the couch, sets the cassette player on the table, pops in the tape, and rewinds it a bit. When he presses play, it's not Taylor, or Monk, or Coltrane, or Lateef that comes out of the speaker. It's the children's choir he directed in Amherst in the 1970s, singing a Billboard No. 1 hit, the "Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In" medley from *The 5th Dimension*.

"Harmony and understanding./ Sympathy and trust abounding, / No more falsehoods or derisions," sing the hundred or so voices with nothing but piano accompaniment.

The dozens of children sing with gusto, with soul. Wiggins listens thoughtfully, appreciating the passion with which they sing.

When the song ends, the crowd erupts in applause, and Wiggins lets it play out before pausing the cassette. "The applause was so long. I've never had applause, for anything, as long as [I did for] those kids, from their parents, and their community. I just...I felt very good about that," he says, nodding his head.

He's influenced some of the greatest jazz musicians to ever play. And yet, it always comes back to children, to those who might choose music for their own journeys, if only they're given the chance.

Wiggins hopes that those who've learned from him "don't become stingy with the subject matter that I've developed. That they want to share. I would like to see that people use their creativity, even in sharing. That's a generosity that I would like to leave here," he says, bringing it back to his own first lesson in music, one that's led him down a lifelong path of musical discovery and truthful self-expression.

If you give someone money to buy some ice cream, "You don't tell them chocolate, or cherry. You let them choose for themselves." ☺

Roland Wiggins "is a one-in-a-lifetime teacher, and friend," says Morwenna Lasko, a Charlottesville-based musician who has taken lessons from Wiggins since spring 2013. Over the years, their talks on music and music theory have led to conversations about life and family, a driving force in both their lives.



In concert

Roland Wiggins will give a somewhat rare concert appearance during A Night of Black Innovation in Music at the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center this Saturday, September 21. The event, which highlights the importance of black music and honors the contributions black musicians have made to American culture, will also include performances by Jamal Millner, Ivan Orr, Yolonda Coles Jones, and many others, including Wiggins' longtime students and friends Morwenna Lasko and Jay Pun.