



Ernest Rodgers

Woodwind great and master teacher Mr. Ernest (Ernie) Rodgers passed away on Tuesday, June 10th. Rodgers was known throughout the country as a giant in the jazz community.

A Detroit resident since 1947, Rodgers graduated from the famed Cass Technical High School and went on to earn degrees from Wayne State University and Eastern Michigan University. Rodgers went on to play with many top jazz artists, including Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Quincy Jones, and Wynton Marsalis. He also recorded and toured with several Motown Records artists during his long professional career.

Rodgers taught in the Detroit Public School system for forty years, where he founded the internationally famous Northwestern High School Jazz Ensemble. The ensemble toured Michigan, Ohio, Canada and Europe, bringing worldwide recognition to both Northwestern HS and to the Detroit Public Schools. His former students include bassists Ralphie Armstrong and Marion Hayden, and saxophonist James Carter. Rodgers was also a long-time Wayne State University faculty member and fixture on campus, where he made a significant impact on the hundreds of student he worked with.

In 2009, Rodgers received the Detroit Jazz Festival's prestigious Jazz Guardian Award. He later returned to the Detroit Public Schools in 2012 as an educator-in-residence in the Detroit Jazz Festival's DPS Jazz Infusion Program. Rodgers assisted significantly with the revitalization of the jazz program at Cass Technical High School, his alma mater.

Now let me tell you what this great man did for me. He was a father figure that many men who just make babies could take notes from. I was at Northwestern during the hay days of when Mr. Rodgers was priming us up for great things. We had a stage band that was so bad (back in those days when they said bad, that meant good) we took the state best stage band trophy several times. I remember the first time we went there (Lansing, MI), we had a double decker Greyhound bus when other schools were using their yellow school buses.



For you young cats who never saw a double decker greyhound bus.

Everyone thought we were the entertainment band. When the word spread that we were there to compete, fear spread throughout the other bands that were there. I remember some of them were saying they might as well get back on their buses and go back home. They had not even heard us yet. The bus alone made a statement that we were there for business and was not going to take any prisoners. They had 18 trophies to hand out. We took 16 of them including the state champ trophy of course. That was the beginning of many success encounters. Mr. Rodgers planted the seeds in me (and I am sure many others) to go out and be the best you can be. Even though many contributed to my successes throughout life, Mr. Rodgers put me on the road and laid the map out. Like many of you, the rest was up to me. I was fortunate to run into him at L.A. Fitness once and we sat and talk for a few. Of course I express my appreciation and gratitude. He was glad to see me and was very humble.

No doubt he played with the greats. I remember some of them he took me to and the professionalism was unbelievable. Everything was business until the show was over.

As with all whom made a major impact, a piece of me went with him. Of course the world is a lesser place and heaven just gets better and better.

Bill Sommerville