

Bernie Williams Stresses 'Teamwork' During OCC Master Class

By Sanford Josephson

During Bernie Williams' glory years with the New York Yankees the team won four World Series championships. Talent notwithstanding, teamwork was a key ingredient in the team's success. That same teamwork, according to Williams, is just as critical in his second career, music.

During the afternoon of September 8, preceding an evening performance by Williams and his All-Star Band at the Jay and Linda Grunin Center for the Arts in Toms River, the jazz guitarist conducted a master class for members of the Ocean County College jazz band. The lesson for the day: Teamwork on the Bandstand.

"Look at each other," he urged the OCC players. "Always be thinking, 'How can I contribute to this guy?' When you're soloing, say what you have to say and then cue the other person. Let them know when you're done."

The band, led by Dave Marowitz, OCC adjunct associate professor of music and director of jazz studies, started off with Eddie Harris' "Listen Here," while Williams observed. Then he joined them on Steve Kuhn's "Butterfat" and Donny Hathaway's "Valdez in the Country."

Williams jammed with everyone in the band, but spent extra time with the two guitarists, Chris Freeman from Brick and David Racioppi of Bayville.

Both guitarists absorbed Williams' message about teamwork. Pointing out that he treated the students as if they were "veteran jazz musicians," Freeman said that Williams told him, "one loses contact with the band and the music when focusing too heavily on his own instrument."

Racioppi added that, "One thing I found helpful that could be applied instantly was that playing in a jazz band, especially one of our size, is an act of supporting one another, during the song and during the improvisation section of it."



From left in back row: keyboardist Armen Gharibian, Dave Marowitz, vocalist Rose Lees, bass guitarist/guitarist Brendan Mariney, guitarist David Racioppi, guitarist Chris Freeman. Front row, from left, alto and tenor saxophonist Edward Benson, alto saxophonist Grace Rochette, Bernie Williams, alto saxophonist Jordan Varga and trumpeter Brandon Cooper. Photo by Sue Marowitz. Julianna Mascia, drums

Freeman admitted that he was "quite star struck upon meeting Mr. Williams. I was also amazed by his humbling generosity and willingness to meet with the students of a small community college in Ocean County, New Jersey." Racioppi said playing with and listening to Williams was "like looking into the future of what my guitar playing could be like. He was comfortable in the band and played with us quite easily."

Some of Williams' other suggestions to the band members:

"When you're playing a solo, make your statement. It's like making a speech. It's your ability to express yourself in a creative way. Get people into your comfort zone."

"Listening to music is almost as important as playing. Open your ears to hear what everybody else is playing."

"Get into the blues. A lot of the jazz aesthetic is based on the blues."

Williams' most recent album, *Moving Forward*, was recorded and released in 2009 on the Reform Records label and then reissued last year by Eq Music.

It features performances by the late jazz bassist (and NBA basketball player) Waymon Tisdale as well as banjoist Bela Fleck and keyboardist David Benoit, among others.

But the biggest surprise is a live recording of Williams playing acoustic guitar with Bruce Springsteen on Springsteen's song, "Glory Days," written in 1984 as the result of his encounter with a former Little League baseball teammate.

And, not surprisingly, there was a jazz interpretation of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame".

In his review of *Moving Forward* for AllMusic, Jonathan Widran said the album "proves that while the four-time World Series champ's glory days are behind him as a ballplayer, he's 'Moving Forward' towards a stellar career in music." □