

# Jazz Happenings

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## Dr. Willis Kirk's Jazz Oratorio

### Jazz

Chuck Workman

At age 14, Willis Kirk was a jazz drummer playing with bands up and down Indiana Avenue. His career as a jazz drummer included performing with local artists like Jimmy Coe and Wes Montgomery as well as world renowned jazz icons Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, Lionel Hampton and Earl "Fatha" Hines. Kirk also became accomplished in the world of academia, earning his doctorate in education, and was president of San Francisco City College. Among jazz drummers he is noted for his published book, *Brushworks*.

Now living in San Francisco, Kirk has returned to Indy to perform a major work of modern Christian church music, *Rejoice Rejoice*, a modern jazz oratorio. Kirk first performed *Rejoice Rejoice* for the Indy Jazz Fest in 2000 at St. John's Catholic Church and again at Covenant Community Church. This year he will present his oratorio at St. Luke's United Methodist Church, 100 W. 86th St., on Friday, April 8 at 7 p.m. So comprehensive is Kirk's oratorio it was broadcast this past Christmas Eve to seven countries on *Voice of America*.

When asked how a modern jazz drummer came to compose such a major work, Kirk had an interesting reply: "In 1968 I got a call from someone at the University of Evansville. They wanted me to do a jazz worship service for a new chapel that was opening up. I thought, I can do that, so I worked up some tunes for our quartet that had Jimmy McDaniel's Lenny Hartley in it. We did about an hour's program, never thinking what we did would lead to. There was an article in the Evansville paper that some people objected to us doing that on that Sunday to open the service with it, other people thought it was the right thing to do."

Even with all of his responsibilities overseeing a college, Kirk still manages to remain active on San Francisco's jazz scene. After more than five decades, Kirk is still humble and grateful about the musical education and the jazz musicians of that era he learned so much from. He still speaks with a passionate nostalgia of his experiences on Indiana Avenue. "The Avenue was something, like a magnet — in fact, it was a magnet. When Benny Goodman's Band came here with somebody like Wardell Gray, Wardell Gray couldn't play his gig at the Circle Theatre fast enough to get down to Indiana Avenue and Henri's. Chicago musicians used to come back and forth here all the time because this was the hub, looking for gigs."

A lot of the credit for the West Coast style of jazz goes to jazz musicians from Indy who moved West with their laid-back Indy style, according to Kirk. He recalls the deep musical family roots of the African-American community that were musically prominent in the city at the time. "A lot of people don't realize, we hear about the Montgomery and Hampton families, but there was a Whitted family, a Williams family and a Jennings family who I played with."

Kirk gives a lot of credit to the gospel people with their guitars and drums that some felt were sacrilegious at the time — but that started the movement leading into liturgical jazz. "Now we are realizing how far ahead of their time they were and we are now trying to catch up. The black church has such a rich history of music, I just feel comfortable doing this project," he stated.

Kirk is steadfast in his belief about classic jazz of the '40 to '60s not being dated by contemporary jazz sounds. "I don't care what the kids do running around and trying other things. When you come down to it, Charlie Parker, Ellington and Basie are forever."

*Rejoice Rejoice* uses a jazz ensemble along with a choir of 20 to 60 voices. The music is reverent, rhythmic, refreshing and uplifting, based on the events leading to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Tickets are \$10; children age 12 and under are free. Tickets can be purchased at Light and Life Book Store, 5062 Pike Plaza Road, phone 293-9922, or By His Grace Bookstore, Light of the World Christian Church, 4646 N. Michigan Road, phone 254-5851. All of the proceeds go to the Dr. Willis Kirk Scholarship Fund to provide musical instruments for under-privileged children.

# An Indy Jazz Fest Guide

By Chuck Workman

## Dr. Willis Kirk

Dr. Willis Kirk grew up playing drums on the Indy jazz scene with the Montgomery Brothers and the Hampton family. He has been a bandleader, performed with the likes of Mel Torme and Tony Bennett and recorded with the great Earl "Fatha" Hines.

Kirk is also an educator. The past president of the City College of San Francisco, he is an internationally noted author for his treatise on Brushes, Brushfire, and has served as a consultant to the National Endowment for the Arts.

Kirk wrote, arranged and will conduct the Indy Jazz Fest's second annual jazz mass downtown at St. John's Catholic Church on Sunday, June 18. This year's mass is entitled "Rejoice Rejoice: A Modern Jazz Cantata."

"Actually, the nucleus of the idea started some 32 years here ago in Indy with a jazz quartet that we played as a Jazz Worship," says Kirk. "Rejoice Rejoice" incorporates verses from Luke 22, 23, 24 and portions of Psalms to tell the story of Jesus' betrayal, deliverance, crucifixion and resurrection.

According to Kirk, the music in this work combines secular, gospel, spiritual and Western classical. "I have rap in there and it's jazz; I have got all of that," says Kirk, who drew upon some of the best voices in the city to make up a 50 member choir featuring soloists such as Everett Greene, Aretta Bush, Sharyn Broaden and Hazel Johnson Strong.

The orchestra will feature local, national and international jazz luminaries, including Jimmie Coe, Marvin Chandler, Reginald Duvall, David Hardiman, Melvin Rhyne, Noel Jewkes and Paul Weeden. Narrating will be Minister Rev. Landrum Shields.

Many jazz composers and musicians have embraced the spirituality of their craft and fused it to the liturgy of the church. Prime examples are Duke Ellington, who was an inspiration for Kirk, as well as Vince Guaraldi and John Coltrane.

"I always wanted to use jazz as a part of a spiritual kind of thing," says Kirk, "because I always felt that jazz was a spiritual music."

Kirk is a native of Indianapolis. He graduated from Crispus Attucks High School and Butler University and taught in the Indianapolis Public School system for 12 years before moving to San Francisco, where he retired as the City College president in 1991. Kirk's ties remain strong to this community and especially the legacy of Indiana Avenue.

"Indiana Avenue became, for me, the conservatory I never went to. Earl Grandy, as far as I am concerned, was the dean of Indiana Avenue. I learned [so many] more [things] on Indiana Avenue from different people like Grandy, the Hampton family or the Weeden family — people who are just natural musicians — than I did at Butler. So I think Indiana Avenue was really our conservatory, because we all knew that music is an oral tradition."

Kirk will conduct his worship service at 1 p.m. Sunday, June 18 downtown at St. John's Catholic Church. This is a free event for the public.