

Jazz Beyond Borders

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WHIPLASH – THE BALTIMORE CONNECTION

Baltimore– The film *Whiplash* is up for five Oscars at this weekend's Academy Awards presentation and has already won awards from the Golden Globes (Best Supporting Actor for J.K. Simmons) and British Academy Film Awards for Best Supporting Actor (J.K. Simmons), Best Editing and Best Sound.

While moviegoers enjoy the film and its makers continue to garner awards, members of the Hank Levy Legacy Band are eager to share the Baltimore connection to the film.

“Whiplash” is the title of a composition written by Baltimore jazz artist and educator Henry Jacob (Hank) Levy (1927-2001). Levy was a saxophonist and composer known for his love of unusual time signatures.

Best known as a big band composer for Stan Kenton and the Don Ellis Orchestra, Hank Levy was also the founder and long time director of the Towson University jazz program where he led many award winning student bands. High school and college students and professional musicians around the world have performed his compositions for big band. Filmmaker Damien Chazelle is among the initiates.

In 2012 Chazelle came to Baltimore to meet with Stewart Levy who continues his uncle’s legacy through Hank Levy Jazz, LLC. At the time, the young filmmaker and his music supervisor and consultant Anna Granucci were taking the film from short to feature length in preparation for the Sundance Film Festival. Chazelle explained that he had played Hank Levy’s music in high school and the tune “Whiplash” was one of his favorite compositions. He had chosen to title the film after that great tune. Stewart Levy couldn’t have been happier. As manager of his Uncle Hank’s estate, he wanted Hank Levy to receive full acknowledgment for his life’s work.

On a parallel mission, musician Bernie Robier manages the Hank Levy Legacy Band. Robier and many other musicians who studied and performed with Hank Levy formed a big band in 1992 after Hank’s retirement from teaching at Towson University. They wanted to continue to play his fascinating compositions. Hank often interacted with the band until his death in 2001.

The Hank Levy Legacy Band continues to play those compositions and many original band members still participate, attending Sunday morning rehearsals at Towson University. They have several recordings to their credit including two up-tempo versions of the piece "Whiplash" recorded in 2014. (Studio musicians recorded the version heard in the film.) The band has also recorded two live CD's: *Hank At Home* (2000) and *An "Odd-Time" Was Had By All* (2004), both distributed by Sonority Records. The original version of "Whiplash," is played at a much slower pace than the movie version as recorded by the world famous Jazz Ambassadors. Their album, *The Legacy of Hank Levy*, was said to be among his favorites.

One of the young musicians appearing on it was trombone player Jim McFalls, whose relationship with Hank Levy subsequently spanned three decades. McFalls calls "Whiplash" an "incredibly clever tune" and remains a fan of Hank Levy's music. "In those days," he says, "rarely did a big band play tunes in odd meters. It's exciting stuff to play."

Jim McFalls began teaching at Towson University in 1999. Two years later he took over the directorship of the jazz orchestra, filling the shoes of his former colleague. Now the acting head of the Jazz/Commercial Division at Towson University, McFalls calls Levy "a great composer and a great educator." He wants to be sure that people realize it was Hank Levy's music, and not his personality that inspired the film. Hank is said to have an offhand teaching style that charmed his students.

When asked what he would like the American (movie going) public to know about the atmosphere and learning techniques he and fellow jazz professors employ to teach young musicians, Professor McFalls replies: "It would be fantastic if they understood that collegiate jazz education generally takes place in a nurturing environment where students are given guidance and instruction while being held responsible for their own paths."

With the popularity of the film, Stewart Levy sees heightened interest in his uncle's compositions. He receives emails from band directors from many countries requesting the music for "Whiplash" and many other titles, and says that media inquiries from television and radio stations have intensified as the Oscar's draw near.

Meanwhile, the big band continues the Hank Levy legacy with upcoming performances. A performance and film clip is scheduled for Bethesda Blues & Jazz on Sunday, March 22 at 7:00 p.m. A celebration of Levy's music is also being planned in Charm City. For more information visit <http://www.hanklevyjazz.com/>