

A Life of Improvisation and Education

Bill Bell Honored with SFJAZZ Beacon Award

When a major cultural institution chooses you for its most coveted honor — as the San Francisco Jazz Festival did when it announced Bill Bell as winner of the 2005 SFJAZZ Beacon Award — it is a sign of substantial lifetime achievement. For some, such recognition might be taken as a signal to relax and bask in the reflected glory of a legendary career. Bill Bell, however, refuses to rest on his laurels. He may have recently concluded a 25-year tenure as chair of the College of Alameda music department, but this multi-talented pianist, composer, recording artist and educator is hardly taking it easy.

“I’m delighted to now have more time to spend with my wife and family,” reports the energetic Bell, “and to have the luxury of picking and choosing which projects to pursue...but musically, I’m busier than ever.”



Photo: Scott Chernis

On Thursday, October 27, join us at Jazz at Pearl's as the San Francisco Jazz Festival celebrates the music and life of Bill Bell with a concert and presentation of the 2005 SFJAZZ Beacon Award.

Among Bell's admirers is flugelhornist and SFJAZZ Director of Education Dmitri Matheny. A protégé of flugelhorn master Art Farmer, Matheny traces his own membership in the “Bill Bell Fan Club” to a 1997 record date that featured Bell with Farmer, saxophonist Harold Land, bassist Rufus Reid, and drummer Tootie Heath. “Even in the company of these other great jazzmen,” Matheny recalled, “Bill Bell stood out as a wise elder, because his wisdom transcends jazz performance and pedagogy to embrace all aspects of life. He really sets an example, not only of discipline and excellence in music, but also of the value in being a good husband, father, and community leader.”

For more than 30 years, Bill Bell has inspired such respect and affection

Swingin' Salute to Beacon-winner Bell

BEACON AWARD

CONTINUED from Page 1

among professional musicians and serious students alike, in educational settings ranging from the Young Musicians Program of UC Berkeley to the College of Alameda to SFJAZZ, where he has served as an artist/educator for the SFJAZZ Jazz in the Middle (youth) and Discover Jazz (adult) education programs. Along the way, he has distinguished himself as a mentor to young artists, many of whom have gone on to successful careers, including Benny Green, Michael Wolff, Will Kennedy, Rodney Franklin, Joshua Redman, and Dave Ellis. As described by Ellis, "When we were kids, nobody had more significance as an authority figure. In our world, there was The Lord, and there was Bill Bell."

While developing his stellar reputation as a teacher, Bell simultaneously pursued a satisfying career as a jazz pianist and sideman, garnering impres-

sive professional credits that include tours with Benny Carter and Carmen McRae and recordings with Nancy Wilson, Dizzy Gillespie and Cannonball Adderley.

A noted expert on the African-American choral tradition, Bell directed the choir for Duke Ellington's historic 1967 "Concert of Sacred Music" at San Francisco's Grace Cathedral, and now leads his own annual concert of gospel and spirituals in Oakland. He lectures widely on the socio-historical connection between jazz and the Negro spiritual.

The SFJAZZ Beacon Award is presented annually to a member of our community who has played a vital role in preserving the traditions and encouraging the growth of jazz in the Bay Area, recognizing a lifetime of achievements by one of our most accomplished musicians, educators and leaders. Now in its sixth year, the coveted honor has been awarded previously to Eddie Marshall (2000), Vernon Alley (2001), Ed Kelly (2002), Phil Elwood (2003), and Allen Smith (2004).