

## Phoenix's jazz sound is epitomized in Prince Shell

By Patricia Myers

Phoenix musician Prince Shell has exerted a strong and valuable influence on what has become known as "The Phoenix Sound." Since the 1970s, Shell's works have been performed from the West Coast to the East Coast, singers have consulted with him for vocal charts, and musicians have sought him for both musical inspiration and spiritual guidance.

Shell has been identified and lauded by former students and fans, including saxophonist-composer Allan Chase, an East Coast music professor who released a CD in 2000 titled *Phoenix* that represents and characterizes that sound.

"Prince Shell has been a mentor and inspiration to generations of Arizona musicians. He is Arizona's link to the bebop era and the Chicago jazz tradition," said Chase, a graduate of Arizona State University, a concert and recording artist who has been dean of faculty for the New England Conservatory since 2000, previously chair of Jazz Studies and currently chair of Contemporary Improvisation and teaching jazz history, theory, ensembles and saxophone.

Internationally known drummer and Phoenix native Lewis Nash studied with Shell before moving to New York City in 1981. He has toured and recorded with Oscar Peterson, Clark Terry, Wynton and Branford Marsalis, Ron Carter, Diana Krall, Milt Jackson, Horace Silver, Betty Carter and many others. "Prince Shell has been a teacher, friend and mentor to me for more than 20 years, and I believe it would be accurate to say that his friendship, help, guidance and musicianship have all contributed to my life and career in the most rich and fulfilling way," he said.

New York City-based music critic Suzanne McElfresh wrote in the *Phoenix New Times* in June 1982, "(Prince) Shell's arrangements are a grandiose yet natural extension of his piano style - - the same wit, creativity, intelligence, respect, beauty and spontaneity."

As a pianist, Shell selects notes sparingly, each chosen to express rather than impress. His style is understated elegance, more Thelonious Monk than Art Tatum, but similarly injected with wit, creativity and spontaneity.

Five years ago, an ensemble was organized with the sole purpose of performing Shell's incomparable music library, archived by guitarist Ted Goddard. Prince Shell and the Ted Goddard 10tet perform original compositions as well as new arrangements of familiar favorites, many showcased on the CD "Speculation," featuring Shell playing piano on nine tracks, including an original, "A Real Cool Blues."

Shell's six decades of musicianship began with playing piano and arranging in high school and college, a talent that escalated when he became chief arranger for the Air Force B Shell was born in Lott, Texas, on Dec. 31, 1928. He took piano lessons for a year, but said he learned mostly by listening to swing bands on the radio and boogie-woogie and the blues on the jukebox at his aunt's café. After his family moved to Chicago, he studied trumpet, alto sax and valve trombone, even though he had been playing piano in high school groups.

He attended high school in Texas before moving to Chicago for his senior year at DuSable High School, where he played valve trombone. His band director was Walter Dyett, who also taught such jazz luminaries as Clifford Jordan, Johnny Griffin, Gene Ammons, Nat Cole, Dorothy Donegan, Richard Davis and Sun Ra.

As a student, Shell performed with Davis, Bob Cranshaw and Arthur Hill. After graduation in 1946, he enrolled for two years at Tennessee State, a black college, where he performed with and arranged for the Tennessee State Collegians big band.

An article by Andrew L. Goodrich in the International Jazz Archives Vol. II, No. 2 Fall 1999-2000 stated: "Prince Shell, who is now an accomplished arranger in his own right, was a young precocious arranger for the orchestra (Tennessee State Collegians), experimenting with new sounds and new techniques in providing the special music for this unique group. From the very beginning this group was a hit. It developed into a professional or commercial organization prepared to play engagements all over the country."

Shell first arrived in Phoenix in 1949, then joined the Air Force in 1955 and became chief arranger for its dance band. In the 1960s, he toured the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Scotland, England, British Columbia, the Fiji Islands and Hawaii with singer-songwriter Gene McDaniels, who wrote "Feel Like Makin' Love" and "Compared to What?" (made famous by Eddie Harris and Les McCann).

After touring the Midwest with tenor saxophonist Gene Ammons, Shell performed in various bands at the legendary Apollo Theater in New York City, the Fox in Detroit, the Regal in Chicago and the Howard in Washington, sharing the bill with and writing arrangements for stars such as Aretha Franklin, Gladys Knight, The Four Tops, The Temptations, Stevie Wonder, and Smokey Robinson & the Miracles. He soon returned to his adopted state in 1971 to nurture his devotion to jazz, inspiring others to continue the tradition.

Shell performed with many Valley groups, including Dave Cook's Vanguard and Francine Reed and Monopoly. He also led his own bands and accompanied touring artists. He continued to compose and write arrangements, including those for the legendary "Roots of Jazz" series in 1980-81. Other charts have been featured in concerts at Berklee College of Music in Boston and the New England Conservatory.

Shell has been writing new compositions and arrangements for the 10tet's six-horns + rhythm section. He has written ballads for specific musicians, such as his arrangement of "Sophisticated Lady" for trombonist Gary Carney. In addition to concert-style arrangements, such as "Here's That Rainy Day" and "Stairway to the Stars," the 10tet's extensive library includes both concert and dance selections, the latter featuring favorites by Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, Woody Herman, Harry James, Glenn Miller and even jump-swing master Louis Jordan.

"The band members find this library very rewarding to play," said Goddard. "Each one has a feature ballad, also ample choruses on the blues, and some great be-bop tunes with substantial musicality. Prince keeps us in suspense wondering what he'll bring in next!"

Jazz in Arizona's 2006 Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to Prince Shell, longtime Phoenix pianist, composer and arranger, earlier this year.

"The Jazz in Arizona Inc. board of directors considered several jazz musicians and their individual efforts on behalf of the Arizona jazz experience," said Gerry Reynolds, president. "Prince Shell was selected this year because of the diversity and depth of his contributions as a pianist, composer, arranger and mentor."

Previous winners of the award were Armand Boatman, Dave Cook, Keith Greko and Nadine Jansen. The honor recognizes those who have created, shared and/or preserved the legacy of jazz by making significant contributions in Arizona. Jazz in AZ was founded in 1977 as a 501-C3 nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging the local performance and appreciation of jazz, America's great original art form. Jazz in AZ sponsors live performances, supports jazz education through a scholarship program, and encourages the camaraderie of others with these interests. More information is available at [HYPERLINK "http://www.jazzinaz.org/" \t "\\_blank"](http://www.jazzinaz.org/) [www.jazzinaz.org](http://www.jazzinaz.org/) or 480-994-0807.