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WITH LOVE



Mystic Voyage of the Howard Jazz Ensemble

By Gwendolyn D. Scotton

A myriad of thoughts raced through the minds of members of the Howard University Jazz Ensemble as the 707 jet which they had boarded only 10 hours earlier flew the last miles of their trip to Romania. The fuzzied images in their minds of this country, steeped in rich folklore and noted for its imposing Transylvanian Alps, would soon come to life in a pulsating burst of chilling temperatures, statured historical figures, tree-lined streets and a thoroughly enjoyable but exhausting two-week concert tour.

Thoughts of earlier performances in Washington, D. C., one at the Smithsonian Institution, in a jazz workshop with noted jazz artist Clark Terry, and another at the Kennedy Center in a tribute to Duke Ellington, mingled and merged to become one.

The words of Suzanne Dickinson, program director of Friendship Ambassadors, Inc., of New York, who along with Howard University and the American Can Company had jointly sponsored the trip, raced through the minds of the musicians.

One month before the trip, Ms. Dickinson had informed members of the Jazz Ensemble that the Romanian people would be very receptive because they are already accustomed to the culturally enriching concert tours of musicians from the United States. The Romanians would be familiar with many of the tunes of the

band's repertoire and would enjoy the band's titillating arrangements.

Looking out the window of the jet at the patches of earth dotted with signs of life visible after seemingly interminable clouds and sky, Fred Irby, III, conductor and founder of the 22-member band, felt a twinge of satisfaction as he remembered the events which led to the trip.

One evening, not long ago, after entertaining at the Howard University pre-Charter Day receptions, Irby was approached by Henry Goldstein, of Goldstein Associates, Inc., a New York-based fund raising organization. Goldstein urged Irby to contact the Friendship Ambassadors who, he said, might be willing to sponsor the group on an overseas concert tour.

Goldstein explained that the organization sponsors cultural tours to socialist countries for purposes of developing international relations through the performing arts.

Within a week, after meeting Goldstein, Irby sent a tape recording to the organization—along with information about the members of the band—for entry into a nationwide competition for a trip to Romania.

Four weeks later, Irby was informed that the band had placed number one out of about 100 entries in a unanimous decision. But Irby was told that the band



would need further financial backing from the university.

Once the necessary financial backing was obtained, plans for the trip were completed and Romania loomed large and beckoning to members of the band, many of whom had never traveled outside the United States before.

Before their departure, the band went through rigorous practice sessions, according to Irby. It was no surprise to him when during their first performance in Bucharest, at the Ciprian Porumbescu Conservatory, the equivalent to the Juilliard School of Music in New York City, the audience cheered and called for an encore.

According to Irby, the Jazz Ensemble gave concerts in several cities in what is commonly referred to in Romania as Houses of Culture. The Romanian guide throughout the tour explained that many of the country's Houses of Culture, formerly opera houses, are more than 100 years old.

The band also performed at Independence Hall in Sibiel and at the College of Medicine in Tigiu Mures. In each city, the enthusiasm for their jazz rock renditions was overwhelming, according to Irby.

Before each performance, Irby was made an honorary member in the local Jazz Society.

the band's jazz rock renditions, some were equally interested in the group itself. They showed curiosity in the band and the band members.

"They seemed really interested in a few of the members' large afro hair do's, jeans and colorful clothing," said Irby.

But the consensus of the band is that the most illuminating of experiences was their overnight stay in the homes of Romanian families in Sibiel, a farm village of 200 inhabitants.

"The villagers spoke no English, and we spoke very little Romanian, but there was no communication gap," said Irby. Through gestures and a few hastily learned expressions, the group was able to enjoy the hospitality of the hosts.

The band also visited the city of Alba Iulia in the Province of Transylvania where Count Dracul's castle is located. A 13th century general, Count Dracul is considered a hero by Romanians. But in Hollywood, centuries later, he was transformed into a celluloid vampire and he became Dracula.

"The impact of the trip on the students has been twofold," according to Irby. "From a musical standpoint, the ensemble's outlook on performance has matured. In the area of cultural relations, two weeks of intensive travel gave them a healthy dose of Romanian history, geography and cultural traditions. It also pro-

vided grounds for comparing Romanian music, government, and economics with those aspects of our culture."

Irby, who teaches brasswind ensemble, stage band, and concert band in the Department of Music, came to Howard in the fall of 1974 from a teaching position in the St. Louis, Mo. public school system. The Jazz Ensemble, which he founded soon after coming to Howard, began performing on campus first, and later at various events in the community.

The ensemble is made up of sophomores and freshman students, with five woodwinds, four trumpets, four trombones, a piano, a bass, drums, guitar, and congos. Of the 22 musicians, 3 are female.

Although for many of the students, the Romanian trip was their first trip abroad, in Irby's case he had traveled to Europe and Southeast Asia during his student days at Grambling College as a member of a musical group called the Mixed Notes.

The apparent comradery which exists among Irby and his students was easily visible at a recent recording session for their first album.

The album, which contains many of the numbers the band performed in Romania, is scheduled for release in the summer and will be used for recruiting by the Department of Music. □