

Milt Hinton Day at the Oberlin Conservatory (June 12)

By Mike Telin and Daniel Hautzinger

“Don’t B-sharp, Don’t B-flat, Just B-natural.” — Milt Hinton (1910-2000)



It’s a phrase emblematic of Hinton’s approach to life: laid-back, optimistic, and warmly human. These are the qualities that were emphasized over and over again on Thursday, June 12, in Oberlin during a day celebrating the life and legacy of Milt Hinton.

Hinton left behind a three-fold legacy: aural, visual, and human. He lives on in nearly 1,200 recordings, in his 60,000 photographs of musicians, and in the many young musicians he mentored and taught. Some of these legacies now reside at the Oberlin Conservatory, which has been gifted The Milton J. and Mona C. Hinton Papers, four of Hinton’s basses, and the \$250,000 Milton J. Hinton Scholarship Fund, established in 1980 by friends and family of Hinton on the occasion of his 70th birthday. This new partnership with the

Hinton estate was facilitated by Oberlin Professor of Jazz Studies and Double Bass Peter Dominguez and Special Collections Librarian Jeremy Smith.



The afternoon began at 2:30 when Jeremy Smith welcomed a larger-than-anticipated crowd who had gathered in the Conservatory lounge, where an exhibit of Hinton's photographs entitled *The Way I See It* was on display (*photo above by James Vitz-Wong*). Hinton expert and estate executor David Berger relayed the story of how, at the age of 14, he first met Hinton. "I called Milt and asked him for lessons," Berger began, but after only a few months the two decided that it might be better if they just "hung out."



The tour then moved around the corner to view an exhibit located at the entrance to the Conservatory library featuring artifacts from the Hinton Papers. (A second display is located inside the library.) The hallway was abuzz as students and faculty participating in the Inaugural Milton J. Hinton Institute for Studio Bass made their way through the crowd, on their way to and from master classes and rehearsals. The weeklong Institute provides the young players with the opportunity to study with renowned teachers in all musical genres including classical, early music, jazz, slap, Latin, and electric.

A highlight came when Peter Dominguez, Professor of Jazz Studies and Double Bass at Oberlin, stopped by with Hinton's late-18th-century Italian $\frac{7}{8}$ size bass and demonstrated its deep, rich sound. Dominguez explained that the instrument was Hinton's favorite, and that he had purchased it when he was touring with Cab Calloway, using \$700 of his own money and borrowing the remainder from Calloway. "Whether you know it or not," Dominguez said, "you've all heard this bass," explaining that Hinton had used the instrument in most of his recording sessions.

The tour moved to the Conservatory's Kohl Building, where digital displays featured topics such as Hinton's time with the Cab Calloway Orchestra (1936-1951, *photo of Hinton and Calloway below*), his extraordinary studio career (1954-1970), and a selection of Hinton's photographs. However it was a stop in the basement archives that revealed

some of the most interesting information. As Jeremy Smith, David Berger and Holly Maxson explained, the Hinton papers consist of all the materials compiled by the Hinton family over the course of their lives, including date books that document Hinton's day-to-day musical activities from the 1950s until his death in 2000. The papers show who Hinton played with and what recording sessions he was on. They also include correspondence between Hinton and other musicians as well as US presidents; honorary doctorates; concert programs; newspaper clippings; and financial and tax records.



The celebration of Hinton continued with a screening of *Keeping Time: The Life, Music and Photographs of Milt Hinton*, co-directed by David Berger, Holly Maxson, and Kate Hirson, at the Apollo Theatre. The film is a compassionate and moving tribute to Hinton, exploring his life. It utilizes hundreds of his photographs and includes interviews with such luminaries as Quincy Jones, Branford Marsalis and Amiri Baraka, to sketch a portrait of this big-hearted musician. Taken as a whole, the photographs — of everyone from Willie Nelson to Miles Davis to Aretha Franklin — document a half century of history. They are striking for their framing of musicians as people rather than idols and for their unassailable optimism: there are photos of Milt and his bandmates standing in disbelief before “Colored Only” signs in the Jim Crow South.

Following the film, Hinton Institute faculty and guest speakers participated in a Q&A session moderated by Jeremy Smith. Each shared engaging personal memories of a generous and lively mentor and musician who they called “The Judge.” As one participant pointed out, “if it weren’t for Milt, none of us would have the careers we have today.”



L-R: Professor Peter Dominguez, Leon Lee Dorsey '81, Jerry Jemmott, Holly Maxson and David Berger (both of the Hinton estate), James McBride '79, John Clayton, and Richard Davis. Photo: Oberlin Conservatory.

The day ended with an invigorating three-hour concert celebrating Hinton, featuring Hinton Institute Faculty. It demonstrated the versatility of the bass, ranging from Donovan Stokes playing a spiritual on Hinton's Blond K bass to Peter Dominguez improvising over Stevie Wonder's *Lately* on Hinton's Italian bass, from Scott Dixon holding the audience in rapt attention with Bach and Scodannibbio to Jerry Jemmott grooving on electric bass.



Faculty and guest artists with Milt Hinton Institute director Peter Dominguez and drummer Billy Hart. Photo: Dale Preston.



Diana Gannett. Photo: Dale Preston.



Philip Alejo '05. Photo: Dale Preston.



Rufus Reid. Photo: Dale Preston.



Jerry Jemmott, electric bass, with Billy Hart, drums. Photo: Dale Preston.



Oberlin jazz faculty: Peter Dominguez (playing Hinton's Ampeg Baby Bass), Gary Bartz, sax, Billy Hart, drums. Photo: Dale Preston.

The evening could only end one way: with the Hinton Institute faculty and students performing together in a bass orchestra. It was the perfect culmination to a day celebrating the life of a true humanitarian, who once said “the only way we continue to live on this earth is by giving our talents to future generations.”



*Student bass orchestra conducted by John Clayton,
with Gary Bartz, sax, Gerald Cannon, bass,
and Billy Hart, drums. Photo: Dale Preston.*



*Student bass orchestra conducted by Rufus Reid.
Photo: Dale Preston.*



*Student bass orchestra conducted by John Clayton.
Photo: Dale Preston.*

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 15, 2014.