

MUSIC

Orbert Davis explores the Mississippi River



HOWARD REICH
My Kind of Jazz

Perhaps it was inevitable that one day Chicago trumpeter-composer Orbert Davis would try to come to terms with the Mississippi River.

His parents grew up in Louisiana and during summers they would take him to the river's shores, the might and majesty of the great waterway very nearly overwhelming him.

"I was always very fearful of it," he recalls.

Three years ago, Davis and his Chicago Jazz Philharmonic played the world premiere of his epic "The Chicago River," a tone poem that explored the herculean task of reversing the river's direction in 1900. The engineering feat sent Chicago's sewage and industrial detritus away from Lake Michigan — enabling the city to blossom as a major metropolis — and dumped the stuff into the Illinois River and on to the Mississippi.

The great river, of course, looms large in American arts and letters and played a vital role in the emergence of jazz, with a young Louis Armstrong (among many others) developing their nascent art on the steamboats that cruised up from New Orleans.

On Friday evening, Davis will lead the CJP in the world premiere of "The Mississippi River: Black and Blues," a four-movement epic that finally will give voice to Davis' thoughts on a subject as vast as it is deep.

"The Mississippi River divides east and west," says Davis, referring to the American land masses on either side of it.

"But it also unites north and south."

By that Davis refers to the Great Migration, the Mississippi River serving as a metaphor for the waves of African-Americans who traveled north in the early and mid-20th century in search of better lives — including his parents.

"I grew up on the Kankakee River," adds Davis, who spent his youth in Momence. "I would



KRISTAN LIEB/FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Orbert Davis and the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic will unveil "The Mississippi River: Black and Blues" on Friday.

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— Orbert Davis, trumpeter and composer

always look at the water and imagine it made up of particles of H₂O from all over the country.

"That's how I wish we were as people. We can be different and from different places. But once we come together as Americans, we should let go of dwelling on those differences.

"In our election cycle, we're all focused on differences. But water from all these tributaries come together in the Mississippi River. That's who we should be as Americans."

Davis sees the great Mississippi, in other words, as a potent symbol of what America can be, and he hopes to express that theme in his newest orchestral work.

But the origin of the project is bittersweet, the idea having come from Regina Fraser, a former

board chair of the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic who died in May at age 73.

Fraser, co-host of the PBS series "Grannies on Safari" and daughter of the legendary jazz cornetist Rex Stewart, had suggested that Davis join her TV show as it took a sojourn on the Mississippi. Realizing he had been contemplating the river's meanings for most of his life, Davis saw this as an opportunity to get closer to it, while mining ideas for a jazz suite.

Fraser's death brought an abrupt end to the trip.

"It didn't make sense without her," says Davis, who decided he needed to write his magnum opus anyway.

So, as he often does before embarking on a major composition, he immersed himself in

books and photographs on the subject.

In general, the new work traces the flow of the river from the north, in Minnesota, down to New Orleans. Along the way, Davis' composition explores key cultural moments in the river's history.

The first movement, for instance, focuses on the Ojibwe tribe of Native Americans that flourished along the northern reaches of the Mississippi.

The third movement, "Hymn of Darkness and Light," explores ideas Davis developed from reading "Mark Twain's Mississippi River," by Peter Schilling Jr.

"He talks about Mark Twain's childhood, and how the river was an attraction for young boys," says Davis.

"They played there, they congregated there, they had mischief there. On the surface, the river is playful. Underneath the river, though, there are tides that became gravesites for many of Twain's friends."

"Hymn of Darkness" leads to a

grand finale, "The Blues That Will Never End," which celebrates New Orleans music and culture.

Davis' "Mississippi River" will serve as the anchor for a program that, like most CJP events, encompasses a great deal of repertoire (often forcing Davis to drop pieces as the night wears on).

Of particular importance to Davis is "Reencuentro" ("Reunion"), composed by Jorge Enrique Amado Molina, one of the teenage students from Cuba the CJP featured in a concert last November at the Auditorium.

When Davis and CJP colleagues returned to Havana last September, the young Cuban handed him the completed score.

"I opened it up ... and right away I pulled Mark (Ingram) over," remembers Davis, referring to CJP's producing director, "and I said, 'We've got play this.'"

"There are about three or four measures that are so Duke Ellington that it's scary. When I told (the composer) that, he said, 'Who?'"

"He had no idea who Ellington is! So I gave him a crash course in American jazz, from Buddy Bolden to Ornette Coleman. I can only imagine what will happen when he gets into deeper aspects of Billy Strayhorn and Ornette."

Because the concert falls on Veterans Day, the orchestra also will play the world premiere of Davis' complete "Home and Away," a tribute to American troops. And the evening, aptly titled "Americana," also will feature an expanded version of Davis' "Concerto for a Genius," featuring ragtime piano whiz Reginald Robinson, whose compositions inspired it.

Ultimately, the concert will contemplate "What it means to be an American," says Davis.

A question that jazz seems uniquely well positioned to address.

The Chicago Jazz Philharmonic performs "Americana" at 7:30 p.m. Friday in the Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Parkway; \$29-\$68; 312-341-2300 or visit www.auditoriumtheatre.org or www.chicagojazzphilharmonic.org.

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