

by Dan Davey

Oregon Stories Project: Three biographical compositions of three outstanding Oregonians



The Portland Jazz Composers' Ensemble (PJCE) is working on a new and exciting project! The "Oregon Stories Project" is an entirely Oregon-based series of programmatic compositions that tell the stories of three Oregonians who have overcome trying obstacles in their lifetime.

Program music, which is based on a narrative and meant to depict a story or conjure images in the mind of the listener, is a compositional concept that has existed for ages. From tone poems to movie soundtracks, composers for centuries have used music to tell a story. Though more commonly found in works from the Romantic period, programmatic elements exist in popular music as well as in the jazz idiom. Brian Wilson's "Pet Sounds" album tells the story of a romantic relationship from first glance to break-up. His "Smile" album paints the picture of a bicyclist's journey from the West Coast to Cape Cod. Duke Ellington wrote programmatic works for the jazz audience in "Tourist Point of View" and the "Queen's Suite."

For perhaps the first time in Oregon, music will be composed by prominent local jazz musicians to tell audible biographies of three state natives. Three separate works have been commissioned to tell three separate stories of Oregonians who have risen above their minority communities to achieve greatness. These compositions will follow audio interviews of each



subject, hosted by Jessica Rand of KMHD Jazz Radio, and will be available for both radio play and live performance in Hood River, Astoria, and Portland. The three Oregonian subjects include Dr. DeNorval Unthank, George Akiyama, and Captain Deborah Dempsey.

Dr. DeNorval Unthank was an African American doctor who came to Portland in 1929, during a time of racial division in the city. Discriminated and harassed by many, Dr. Unthank settled in a home on Southeast 29th street and established his medical practice. He devoted his work to serving not only the African American community, but also the Asian and white communities and he used his leverage as a trusted professional in Portland to speak out against racial divisions and help improve relations. He became the first African American member of the Portland City Club, Oregon's largest civic affairs group. He was a cofounder of the Portland Urban Leagues and served as a member of the state Committee for Equal Rights and the Council of Social Agencies. Sheldon Hill, Director of the Urban League, said that "Contributions [Dr. Unthank] has made to the community over 50 years have a lot to do with the direction race relations have taken in this town." Dr. Unthank's story will be told on air by his daughter Lesley Unthank.

George Akiyama was an American-born Hood River resident whose family immigrated from Japan, making him a first generation American citizen. George was drafted into the Japanese American 442nd Infantry during World War II and was awarded the Silver Star and the Bronze Star Medal for his bravery in combat and meritorious service. Excited to have survived his four years in Nazi Germany, George anxiously awaited the return to his home town. Arriving in Hood River, he discovered a community stricken with prejudice and discrimination rather than celebrating a decorated war hero. Comments that threatened violence from neighbors and signs saying "No Japs Allowed" made his transition to post-war civilian life a challenge. George's story will be told by historian Linda Tamura, a fellow citizen who came forward to support and help him.

Captain Deborah Dempsey will tell her own story as the first woman river pilot to guide ocean-going vessels over the Columbia River Bar. As the first female student at the Maine Maritime Academy and Valedictorian of her class, she was the first woman to graduate from any maritime academy in the United States. She was also the first woman to receive a merchant

marine unlimited masters license, the first woman to sail as a master, and the first woman to command a cargo ship on international waters.

This composition project has been initiated and developed by the Portland Jazz Composers Ensemble, a twelve-piece jazz chamber orchestra that performs new works by Portland and Oregon-based composers. Starting out as a young group of Portland State University graduates with a passion to continue to write and feature music for large ensembles, the group has developed into a nonprofit cooperation, commissioning and performing music by both emerging and established Portland composers. In 2013, they founded their own record label, PJCE Records, with the mission of documenting the sound of the Portland jazz scene and the voices of its composers and improvisers. The label is now under the direction of local guitarist and educator Ryan Meagher, and continues to produce a variety of high quality recordings annually.

At the helm of this project is the PJCE's Executive and Artistic Director Douglas Detrick. Since initiating his tenure as Executive and Artistic Director for PJCE, the cooperation has expanded its horizons to include projects with local and national guests such as Taylor Ho Bynum, Catherine Feeny, and John Gross. They have held several themed concerts relating to local history and culture, which is where the concept of the Oregon Stories Project was born.

Douglas Detrick is a composer, arts consultant, and trumpeter with impressive recognitions for his chamber jazz quintet AnyWhen Ensemble, including the 2011 Chamber Music America New Jazz Works and Presenting Jazz grant. The competitive and popular Presenting Jazz grant commissioned Douglas to compose his work titled "Boldly Launched Upon the Deep." His ten-movement suite "The Bright and Rushing World" was premiered at New York's Jazz Gallery in 2012 and has been performed through the United States. Douglas will compose one of the biographical works in the Oregon Stories Project.

Renowned film composer and guitarist Mark Orton will also compose part of the project. A graduate of the Hartt School of Music and The Peabody Conservatory, Mark lives and works in San Francisco as part of the newly formed Tin Hat Trio. This composer group has produced seven critically acclaimed albums in its recent history. Mark has written scores for dozens of documentary, narrative feature, and fine art films, including *The Good Girl*, *The Real Dirt on Farmer John*, and *Sweet Land*. He has composed music for modern dance, theatre, video/art installation, experimental radio, concert halls, and the circus. Mark also works as an arranger and producer with influential singers such as Willie Nelson, Mike Patton, Tom Waits, and Madeline Peyroux.

The third composer contributing to this project is pianist, composer, and PSU Professor of Music, Darrell Grant. Darrell has performed for international audiences as the pianist in vocalist Betty Carter's trio as well as with Frank Morgan, Sonny Fortune, Roy Haynes and more. At the age of seventeen, he earned a scholarship to the Eastman School of Music and did graduate studies in Jazz Theory and Composition at the University of Miami. He has taught as a

professor of music at Portland State University since 1997 and founded the Leroy Vinnegar Jazz Institute, which strives to preserve and promote the jazz idiom as well as its cultural heritage and social history in the Northwest. His previous four albums have topped several jazz charts and feature his instrumental and lyrical genius.

There will be three live performances by the Portland Jazz Composers Ensemble dedicated to telling the musical story of these incredible individuals. On Friday April 1, 2016 at 7:30 PM, the Columbia Center for the Arts in Hood River (215 Cascade Ave, Hood River, OR 97031) will host the first live performance of Oregon Stories. The second performance will be on Saturday, April 2, 2016 at 8:00 PM, hosted by the Liberty Theatre in Astoria (1203 Commercial St, Astoria, OR 97103). The final performance will be at the Old Church in Portland (1422 SW 11th Ave, Portland, OR 97201) on Friday, April 8, 2016 at 7:30 PM. Tickets for each event are available at www.pjce.org.

For our beautiful state of Oregon, this project casts a spotlight on the challenging lives of these individuals and celebrates their success over struggles of racial and gender barriers. It represents a larger movement of inclusion and equality among Oregonians. Audience members will feel connected to these three individuals through carefully crafted harmonic structures and melodic phrases. The compositions will inspire imagery of dissonance as well as triumph and introduce us all to the stories of Dr. DeNorval Unthank, George Akiyama, and Captain Deborah Dempsey.