20 questions for David Baker

Interview by David Brent Johnson Photography by Steve Raymer

B-Town Hero and Jazz Legend

If Benny Goodman was the "King of Swing" and Edward Kennedy Ellington was "the Duke," then David Baker could be called "the Dean of Jazz." Distinguished Professor of Music at Indiana University and conductor of the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra, he is at home performing in concert halls, traveling around the world, or playing in late-night jazz bars.

Born in Indianapolis in 1931, he grew up in a thriving mid-20th-century local jazz scene that begat greats such as J.J. Johnson and Wes Montgomery. Baker first came to Bloomington as a student in the fall of 1949, returning periodically to continue his studies over the next decade, leading a renowned IU-based big band while expanding his artistic and compositional horizons with musical scholars such as George Russell and Gunther Schuller.

In 1966 he settled in the city for good and began what is now a world-renowned jazz studies program at IU's Jacobs School of Music. A pioneer of jazz education, a superlative trombonist forced in his early 30s to switch to cello, a prolific composer, Pulitzer and Grammy nominee and Emmy winner whose numerous other honors include the Kennedy

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Toddler David in Indianapolis, circa 1933.
Photo courtesy of the Baker family

Center for the Performing Arts "Living Jazz Legend Award," he performs periodically in Bloomington with his wife Lida and is unstintingly generous with the precious commodity of his time. Writer and WFIU jazz DJ David Brent Johnson met up with Baker in his studio recently to ask him 20 questions.

BLOOM You grew up in Indianapolis in the 1940s, at a time when the jazz scene on Indiana Avenue was thriving, but it was also a time when segregation posed a lot of barriers to an aspiring young African-American musician. What led you onto the path of becoming a jazz artist?

BAKER Probably being exposed to so much music, hearing everything from the Mills Brothers to The Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet. My thoughts weren't about being a musician at that time however, but just enjoying music. On Saturday night I would hear Minnie Pearl on Grand Ole Opry and at the same time I was listening to jazz from a Tennessee radio show called *Randy's Record Shop*. My real love, though, was country music until a cousin gave me a Dizzy Gillespie record—which I didn't pay any attention to. A few days later he came back and asked, "How did you like that record?" I said, "Oh, it was great!" and he said "Then you don't need these anymore," and he picked up all my country-western records and broke them. I now had only one record! I didn't get mad at him because he was bigger than me, but it opened another door and I started listening. It was a hell of a baptism but what a revelation!

Given the circumstances of that time, the only doors that were open in music were those

designated for blacks—gospel music, rhythm and blues, rock 'n roll, big jazz bands. It was foolish to aspire to play in a symphony orchestra, even though we were encouraged at my high school, Crispus Attucks, which was the black school. The Klan was responsible for that school, but I don't think they could have ever known what a blessing it was…to have a whole faculty of musicians teaching us, plus we were exposed to the history of the diaspora and black achievement. Oscar Robertson, the great basketball player, put Attucks on the map, but there's a whole legacy of great musicians that went there as well—J.J. Johnson (trombonist), Jimmy Coe (saxophonist), Leroy Vinnegar (bassist), Carl Perkins (pianist), Jimmy Spaulding (saxophonist), and Wes Montgomery (guitarist).

BLOOM These days, if a young musician wants to get a jazz education, he or she comes to a place like Indiana University and takes courses with people like you, Pat Harbison, or Luke Gillespie. But how did the teenage David Baker get his jazz education?

BAKER The education took place in the street. You had people that encouraged you, like Wes Montgomery, and you went to jam sessions, which were rife at the time. For instance, in Indianapolis, in the late 1940s, you could go from one end of Indiana Avenue to the other end, and there would be a club on almost every block. My friends and I would go around to the clubs, listening and trying to get in because we weren't old enough. We'd put on berets and our horned-rimmed glasses, draw mustaches on our upper lips and hope it didn't rain.

I also had a very tolerant teacher named Russell Brown. Even though jazz was not his forte, he encouraged us and put together a group called the Rhythm Rockets. We were sad, I mean really horrible, but he

The teenage Baker at Crispus Attucks High School. *Photo courtesy of the Baker Family*

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was patient and made us listen to music. And for me, that's the thing that became the basis of my teaching—to recreate as accurately as possible those circumstances, but in the context of a formal situation. Figure out what you can and we'll fill in the gaps.

BLOOM Who were some of your other musical mentors, and what kind of impact did they have on you as a young musician?

BAKER The people that affected me the most were the members of the Hampton family. I probably owe Slide Hampton (trombonist) more than I will ever be able to repay him, because Slide was able to put things like what J.J. Johnson was doing into terms that I could understand. We were playing in the family band and we would practice at their home. We would play a recording of a piece by Stan Kenton or a piece by Dizzy Gillespie. Then we would slow the recording down and learn the piece and learn our own parts.

BLOOM Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with J.J. Johnson? Was he sort of your early model on the trombone?

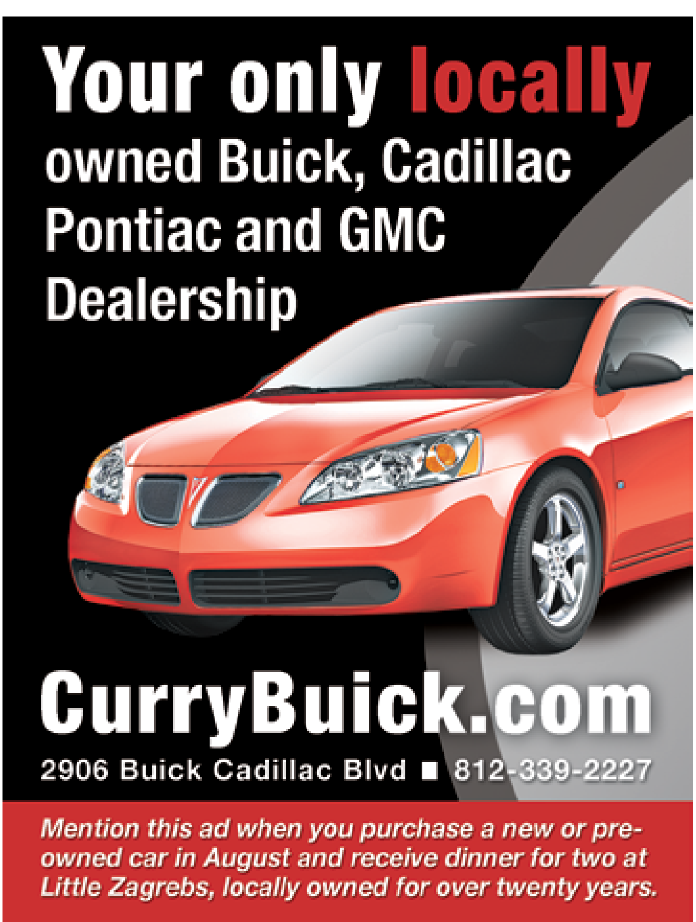
BAKER He was the first one, but sometimes what he was doing wasn't always accessible because of the level of difficulty. For me it was more the iconic posture that was there. Look, I could walk down the halls of Crispus Attucks High School and see all the graduating classes' photographs; and there from 1942—or whenever it was—there was J.J. but there was also Jimmy Coe and Eldridge Morrison, and all these other guys who were on the wall, too. And you had this to which you could aspire.

Baker and Wes Montgomery, circa 1954. *Photo courtesy of the Baker family.*

BLOOM You also knew Wes Montgomery in the years before his national star took off. There's a great picture of the two of you standing back to back, with Wes holding his guitar and you holding your trombone. What was it like to work with him?

BAKER Well, Wes was the one (of the Montgomery brothers) who decided to stay home in Indianapolis, more than anything because he and his wife Serena had a lot of children to take care of. We would play sometimes at parks or other jobs and Wes would teach us his tunes by rote. The only real problem was in the course of a long set of solos, when we got ready to take the tune out, we couldn't remember what the head (melodic theme) was or how it went. And fortunately, being around Wes, pretty soon you developed the skill of memorizing everything. This is really what you bring to the table when you're an improviser—to be able to bring to the surface all that you've heard, all that you know, without having a piece of music in front of you. With Wes, the most deadly words you could hear from him were, "You'll hear it," because you'd ask him how he did that, and he'd just say, "You'll hear it." And basically, over the long haul, you probably would. Or you might choose to go into another field.

Around this time Gunther Schuller heard my big band when he came out as a horn player with the Metropolitan Opera. I had some killer players from IU and the band was smoking. He wrote an article for the *Jazz Review* called "Indiana Renaissance." I had taken him to see Wes Montgomery and I don't think I will ever forget his reaction hearing Wes for the first time. Wes just astounded people. I can remember shortly after that taking Cannonball Adderley (saxophonist) down to the Missile Room (an after-hours club) to see Wes for the first time. I remember his head rolling back and shaking. He immediately called the record producer Orrin Keepnews. Wes and I were supposed to play together that next week, but instead he ended up going to New York to make a record with his trio. Like they say, the rest is history.



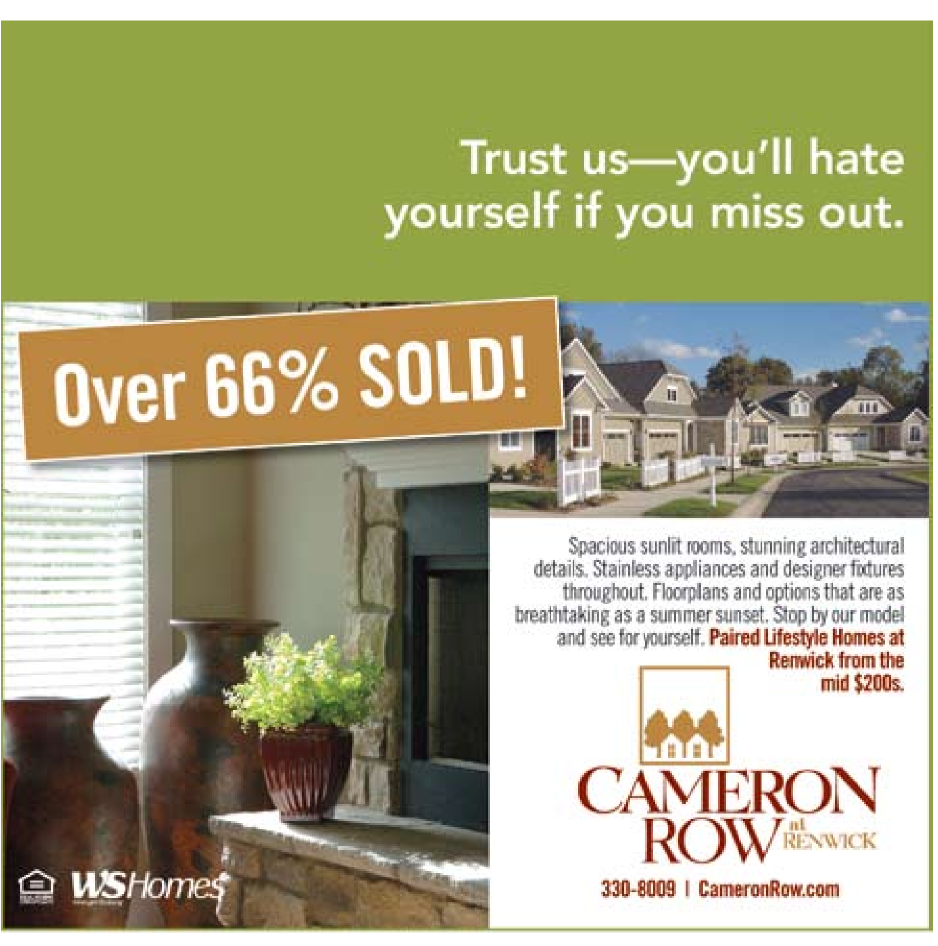
BLOOM Can you describe what it would be like to go back to 1950 and walk down Indiana Avenue? What would you have seen and heard?

BAKER It would have been alive then. You would start at Ohio Street—pawnshops lined one side and the clubs lined the other. You would go into the Red Keg, Henri's, the Sky Club, George's Bar, all the way down to the General Hospital, which was by Lockefield

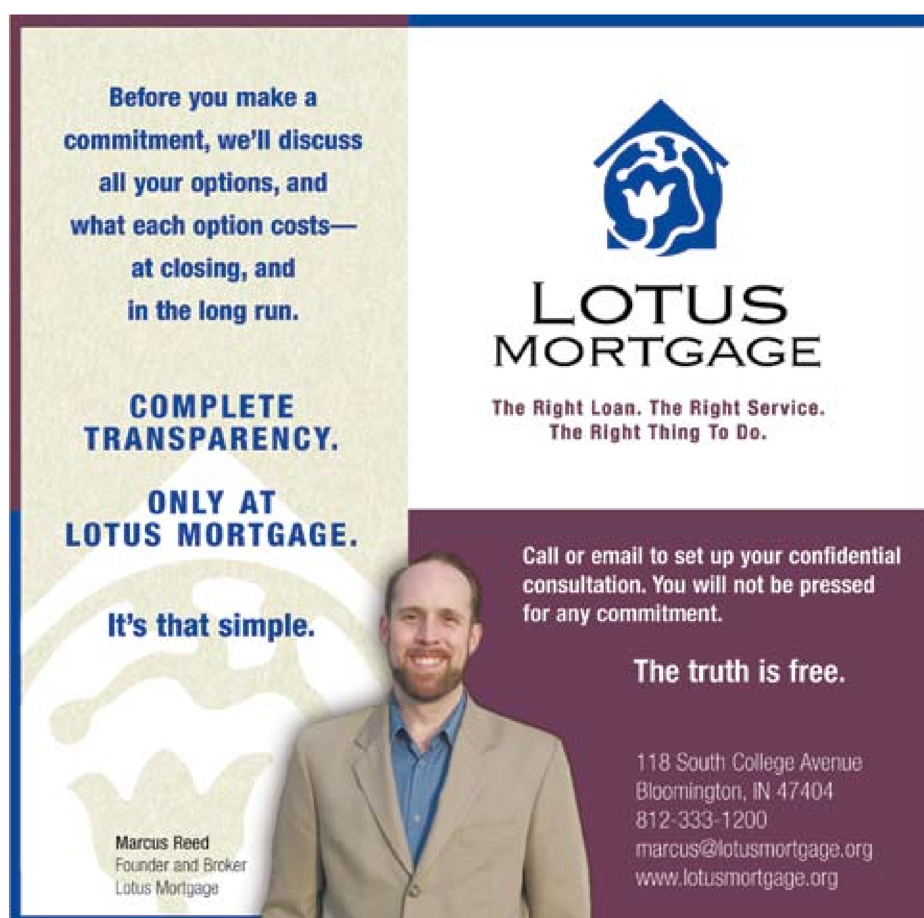
Baker in his IU days with members of Fred Dale's orchestra. (left to right) Vern Cressler, Al Cobine, Dave Baker, and Bud Baker. *Photo courtesy of the Baker family*

Gardens. And every one of those clubs had a jazz group in it. I don't mean something that passes for jazz like now, when you go to a jazz festival and only about 20 percent of it is actually jazz. Not all of the groups were great, but it really was a little like being on New York's 52nd Street at this time. One club would have Carl Perkins and Leroy Vinnegar and another would have Wes Montgomery and Buddy Montgomery. My friends and I went to the jam sessions and we were accepted even though we weren't very good. We'd play the one or two tunes that we knew, pack up our horns and go to the next club on the next block. So in the course of an evening, we would play the same tune at each club and probably the same solo if we worked it out.

BLOOM In the late 1950s you and some members of your Indianapolis group went to the Lenox School of Jazz in Massachusetts, and that seemed to have a profound impact on your jazz conceptions and your subsequent career. How did your studies and your exposure to musicians such as Ornette Coleman end up affecting your musical thinking?



Baker, in full Afro, with his friend, the great Dizzy Gillespie, circa 1975. *Photo courtesy of the Baker family*



BAKER We were at the Lenox School because Gunther Schuller had invited us. You had to go on scholarship. The year I went in 1959 was the year Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry came to the East Coast. I had some antipathy to the new sounds because our group hadn't even been discovered yet, and here we were finding out that we were already old-fashioned. But it was an exciting time because we had history classes and private lessons with people who are legends now. It was the foundation of the jazz education system.

We were in the center of this jazz revolution and George Russell (composer/pianist) said, "Ornette is going to really upset New York City." I couldn't envision that, but when Ornette went into the Five Spot, he did. He upset it and turned the way people were thinking by playing the new music. It was called Free Jazz—and some unmentionable things as well.

BLOOM You ended up playing in New York City's Five Spot nightclub with George Russell, who pretty much absorbed your Indianapolis group. This was at a time when people like Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis were performing regularly. What was it like playing the New York City jazz scene in that era?

BAKER George Russell had come out to Indianapolis and we rehearsed every day, all day long, preparing to go to New York. I remember opening night in the Five Spot, George had written all of this music and we hadn't perfected it but we had it under control. I remember looking out and there was J.J. Johnson sitting at one table, John Coltrane with one leg against the wall was eating a box of Sunkist raisins, Miles Davis was there, you name it, not because of us but because of George Russell. We were so busy trying to play this difficult music that we couldn't really think about who was watching us, but we also had the advantage of them not knowing exactly what we were trying to do!

The Jazz Gallery and the Five Spot were owned by the same people, which meant if we were playing in one club, we could go to the other club for free. That's how I met Monk for the first time, and it was so wild, because we'd been going there every night to hear them but they hadn't been to hear us. So one night I looked up when I'd finished playing a solo and I opened my eyes and Monk is standing 20 feet from me with his hat on and his arms crossed and when I came off stage he said, "You do look a little like me." Somebody had told him

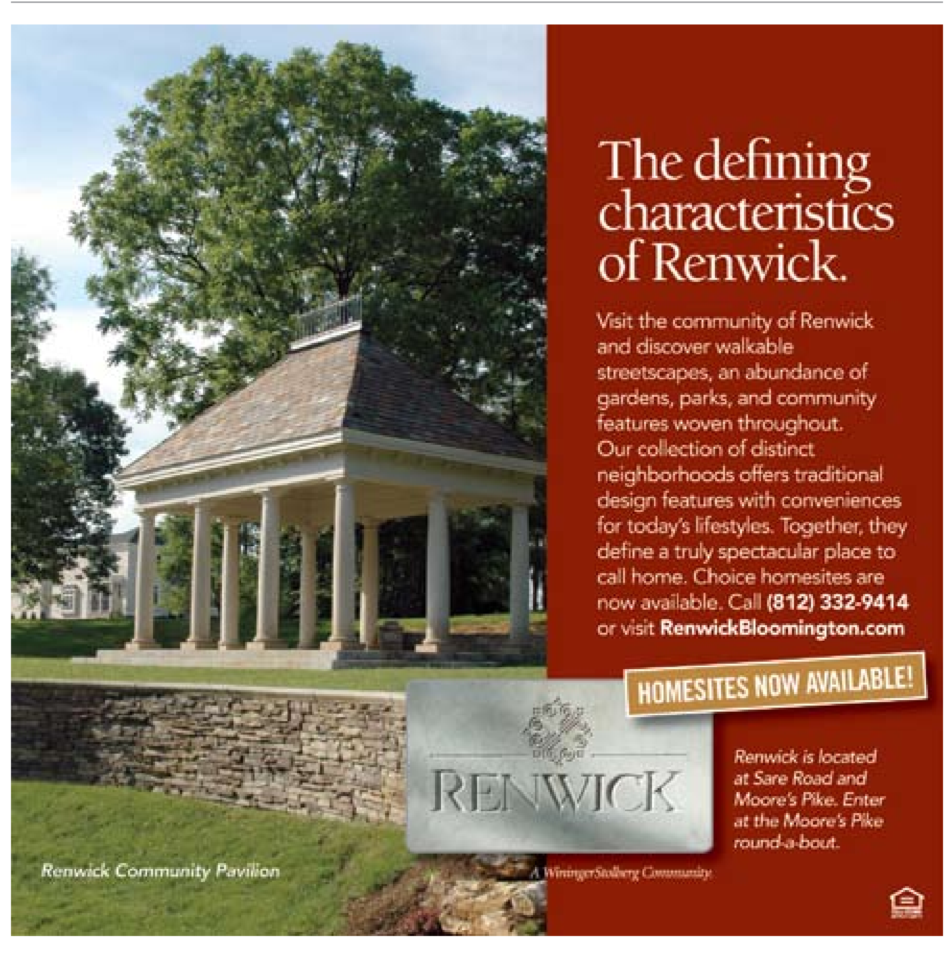
that we looked alike. This was 1959. I didn't see Monk again until 1964. I was with Jamey Aebersold and we were in Cincinnati and we were down in the ballpark in the warm-up rooms. I hear a gasp and I look around and there's Monk and he walked up to me and said, "But you're uglier than I am." And I thought, "This is so out. This conversation started five years ago." I did get to know him a little later.

BLOOM In 1962 you won the Downbeat New Star Award for trombone players. What led you to take up cello instead, and why did you choose that particular instrument?

I remember looking out and there was J.J. Johnson sitting at one table, John Coltrane with one leg against the wall was eating a box of Sunkist raisins, Miles Davis was there, you name it…

BAKER In 1952 or '53 I was in a car accident coming back from a gig at Lake Hamilton. I was asleep in the front seat and I was thrown through the windshield and they thought I was going to die. I didn't die but across six or seven years damage was done to my jaw and I didn't know it. One side had atrophied and I was making compensating movements to make it work and all of a sudden I started to have to play with an acrylic brace to keep my teeth apart. One of the last records George Russell and I made, I was playing with that thing holding my teeth open. I knew I was going to have to learn to play another instrument if I was going to stay in music, so I stupidly tried to learn piano, even though I knew after the first day I wasn't going to stay with it. I practiced six or seven hours every day for a year, then I switched to bass for two years. Mr. Brown said that thing wasn't going to challenge me so I went to a pawnshop and bought a $15 cello. I taught myself and I had disastrous fingers. I think God works his wonders in mysterious ways, because if I had stayed in New York I probably wouldn't have turned to teaching and all the other things I do, like composing. But because of that accident, it forced me into areas I would have never considered.

BLOOM What was the story behind the beginning of the IU jazz studies program in the mid-1960s?



BAKER People like Roger Pemberton, Jerry Coker, and Buddy Baker had already begun making some incursions into the thinking of the dean, Wilfred C. Bain. And Dean Bain, who'd helped start the very first jazz program

I think the Civil Rights Movement and the death of Dr. Martin Luther King helped make jazz a degree program.

at the University of North Texas before coming to IU, was probably sensitized to the fact that this was something rising. Jerry Coker, who was leaving, recommended me. I was a distant choice. They auditioned Bill Russo and talked to a lot of other really famous people, but I was the one who accepted when they offered me the job. I'd been teaching in Indianapolis all the time that I was recuperating from the trauma of the accident. To show you how long ago that was, I was charging $1.25 for lessons. I came here in 1966, the degree program was approved in 1968, and for the first ten years I was the sole person teaching it. Then Dominic Spera, who'd been my teaching assistant while he was working on his master's degree, came back to IU and joined the faculty.

I think the Civil Rights Movement and the death of Dr. Martin Luther King helped make jazz a degree program. All of a sudden there was this interest in diversity at the degree level. Schools were just beginning to be integrated and so consequently people were becoming very interested in having some awareness of who black people were. We were also among the first people who had street cred to come in and do a jazz program. Coker had played with Woody Herman and I had played with George Russell and toured with Quincy Jones. So all of a sudden now you've got some people who have street cred teaching these courses where street credibility is so important because that's the only way you could learn at the time.

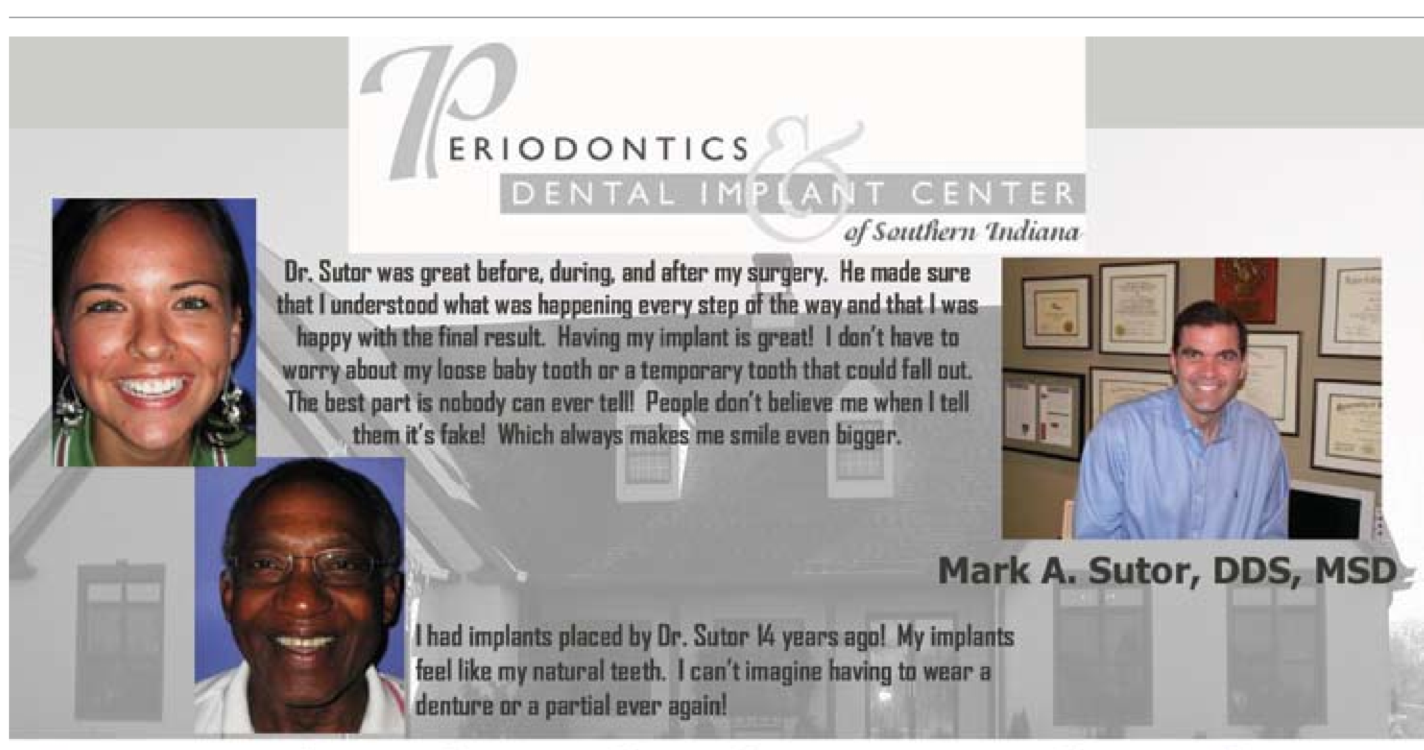
BLOOM Did you have any idea when you were doing this in the late 1960s and early '70s that it would grow and be what it is today?

BAKER No, I don't think anybody had a notion. I knew that this was a program that needed to exist, because you can't ignore a music that may be one of America's biggest exports. But I don't think anybody thought with any certainty that it would become this mega-business.

BLOOM A lot has gone on in jazz since you started the program. Fusion was big in the 1970s, and in the '80s and '90s you had the rise of repertory orchestras and the Young Lions, as well as new avant-garde movements like the downtown New York scene. How has the jazz studies program chosen to reflect these trends (or not) and absorb them into what you teach?

BAKER Basically we've had to keep our ears to the ground, because the curriculum has been dictated pretty much by what the students need. We look backwards but tell them, "This is your legacy but you can't stop here, because you've got to earn a living." I've always thought that there are two things we have to do: one is acculturation, and the other is to make the students marketable. We can't expect that all they're going to play is big band music or they're going to play all the music of the past, even though the lingua franca is bebop; I think that's our Bach period.

Because of technology, music moves so much more quickly now and anything that's done or been done before is available to



everybody. It's good that we've got such precocious students and a faculty that is aware of all of these kinds of changes. And we'll find out which ones peter out and which ones ultimately last because of their merit.

BLOOM As you say, classic recorded jazz is more available to us than ever before. Somebody with enough money can go online or go into Borders and pretty much buy the history of jazz in one shopping trip. How does this affect the students whom you're teaching today? How do they compete against Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and Duke Ellington and all the other greats of the past?

BAKER Well, you know, it's kind of funny because I remember seeing an anecdote about a boy who brought home an F in history and his father said, "How could you do that? I always got all As." The boy said, "Yes, but daddy, when you were my age they didn't have as much history." The kids now have access to more information in one day than we would have had in 10 years. I can remember when David Liebman (saxophonist) showed up with the first tape recorder you could carry, the Walkman. He got it from Japan and I thought, "Boy, this is impossible." Now somebody can come to class with 3,500 pieces of music on an iPod, and I think because of that, the level of player is so much higher. Now they may not be smarter, but they have such greater knowledge and skills. And we laugh sometimes, me and some of my older colleagues, because we think we couldn't get into the IU program these days, simply because the kids know so much more. So in that way, they've actually got an advantage.

BLOOM Who would be in your David Baker All-Star dream band?

BAKER My trumpet section would probably be Snooky Young playing lead, maybe Jon Faddis. I've gotta go with him because I think he's a monster. Freddie Hubbard, Woody Shaw, Clifford Brown, and Lee Morgan for the rest. If I had a trombone section it would be Jay (J.J. Johnson), Kai Winding, Slide Hampton, and Curtis Fuller. For the saxophones: Charlie Parker, Benny Carter, Phil Woods, John Coltrane, and Sonny Rollins. Wes (Montgomery) would be my guitarist. My piano player? I would probably have to have a three-headed monster here. I would say Bill Evans, McCoy Tyner, and Bud Powell. I think the giant of the times for bassists was Ray Brown, but if I moved beyond that you would see people like John Patitucci and certainly Ron Carter. Drummers, I would probably go with a modernist; it would be either Tony Williams or Elvin Jones. But my favorite drummer of all time would probably be Roy Haynes.

Baker and his wife Lida play a little "Heart and Soul" together in his IU studio.

BLOOM Your wife Lida is a flutist and often performs with you. What sort of influence has she had on your musical career?

BAKER Well, she grew up listening to classical music and playing in orchestras. We met when she was a student here a long, long time ago. We've known each other for I can't hardly tell you how many years; we've been playing together professionally for the last 15 or 20. She knows the literature better than I do probably because I know it in a backward sort of way, because what we played in high school was classical music but rearranged, or in a concert band because we didn't have, for instance, the bassoons.

Lida can play anything that she can hear. I don't know many people I can say that about. Slide Hampton can do that. Jamey Aebersold can do that. I had to learn to do that. She'll hear

Baker, the composer, at the Steinway.

things that I have to think about and she will immediately be able to internalize the music.

BLOOM You've been based in Bloomington now for more than 40 years and your history with IU and the city goes back even further than that. What about the city appeals to you?

BAKER I've watched Bloomington grow from the time when it was completely segregated. But even then there never was the kind of ugliness that occurred in some urban areas. It was a place you could raise a family and you didn't usually have to worry about somebody knocking you in the head or trying to rape one of your daughters. And I don't know of another place this size that can give you virtually as much as you can get in New York, or Chicago, or L.A. Where else can you go and hear an opera? A premiere of an opera, even? Or one night you hear jazz bands and then you go to see a play and then you go to an art exhibit. And you do all of this and it costs you probably $25 and your car will still be there when you get back.

BLOOM A friend of mine from the East Coast was out here and commented that Bloomington has a really active jazz scene, but that few of the players are African American. What's your take on that?

BAKER We simply don't have the numbers. I'm not even sure how many black people are in the music school, let alone the university at large or the city itself. But I would say it's no more than 5 or 6 percent of the overall population. Those things that are part of Afro-American culture, whether it's cuisine or entertainment, aren't easily found here, and it poses a bit of a problem. Sometimes it's hard for me to convince a black student to attend here. I think there are students from New York or Philadelphia who come out here and don't see anybody that looks like them, you know, except for a handful of people. It's a drag that it gets down to that because the only thing that separates most of us is the color of our skin, and yet the one thing we hang onto most is the color of our skin.

BLOOM Your recent composition, "Concertino for Cellular Phones and Symphony Orchestra," which involved audience participation, drew quite a lot of attention with really nice write-ups in *The New York Times* and *Time Magazine*. How does a longtime artist or composer stay modern and inspired in the way that you have?

BAKER It's easy for me because almost everything I write is on commission. When you're writing on commission you're pretty much at the whim of whoever pays for the tunes, so I have to be conversant with whatever they're asking for. If they say they want a jazz element, I try to narrow it down: Do they want the street element or something elite? So that's one of the things that helps to keep me aware. At the same time I need to express myself in what I want to do rather than what someone is paying me to do, so consequently I'm curious about everything. I probably haven't done as much with electronic music simply because I'm not literate with computers, but I try a little bit of everything, you know—avant-garde, fusion, everything.

And I listen. I try to listen to the radio because if I'm listening to what I own, I'm listening to the things that I love and already know. On the radio sometimes I'm getting ready to turn it off and something will come on and I will say, "Wow, what was that?"

BLOOM When you're not playing, teaching, or composing, or thinking about jazz, what else to do you do for enjoyment or to unwind?

BAKER A vacation is an anomaly. First of all, my idea of relaxation is to go from one set of things to another set of things, so composing and writing is a vacation for me. I love to read books. I bought three books yesterday—one by Sidney Poitier; I bought George Foreman's new book; and I got the new book on Glenn Miller. I'm going to read (former CIA director) George Tenet's new one too, because it covers some pretty important events in recent history. And I'm a sports nut, particularly basketball and football—basketball more so, whether it's the IU Hoosiers or professional. I also really enjoy studying the Bible and being a born-again Christian.

BLOOM Given everything you've done to date, what are you most proud of in your life?

BAKER I would probably say being a teacher and helping to raise my daughter April, whom I am so proud of, and seeing her enjoying success and a great family. Being a teacher, because I think of all the students I've taught, and if each one reaches someone who then reaches someone else, consequently almost anywhere I go I can find somebody who either studied here or studied with somebody who studied with me. So I'm very proud of that influence. ✲