

Opinion

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
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Jazz melds musicianship and manhood

It was a night to remember — a cliché that nonetheless conveys a recent experience. Two Fridays ago, I was hanging out at B-Sharp's, a jazz cafe in Frenchtown, and experienced some incredible music.



Chris Timmons

My View

There was Paul McKee on trombone, Bill Kennedy on tenor sax, Leon Anderson on drums, Scotty Barnhart on trumpet, Bill Peterson on piano, and a graduate student on bass doing some hard playing, sweating as he tried to stay with the licks were being volleyed about the room.

The numbers were mostly uptempo — a great sampling of the individuality inherent in the genre — from John Coltrane to Joe Henderson, and the riffs were playful, somber, impish, fun with a touch of locker-room joshing to goad the musicians to play their best.

A highlight of the night was a minor, not long enough duel between Kennedy and Barnhart, imbued as it was with all the elements of excitement, surprise, laughter, mischief and craft that good jazz playing demands.

Anderson and Barnhart are internationally renowned instrumentalists and widely praised for their amazing, brilliant chops. They are also professors at the College of Music at Florida State University.

Throughout the night, I couldn't help pondering both — a sharply dressed Barnhart, in a black suit with an even-keeled green Oxford shirt, and Anderson, wearing dark-hued brown African attire — as black men in a demanding mistress of a craft, playing the night away, firmly and expressively. They are incredible role models, showing how man should approach his life and vocation.

There are plenty of role models for black young men, whether you're a Alpha Phi Alpha or a potential North



Young black men seeking role models would do well to look to Scotty Barnhart, above, and Leon Anderson, below.

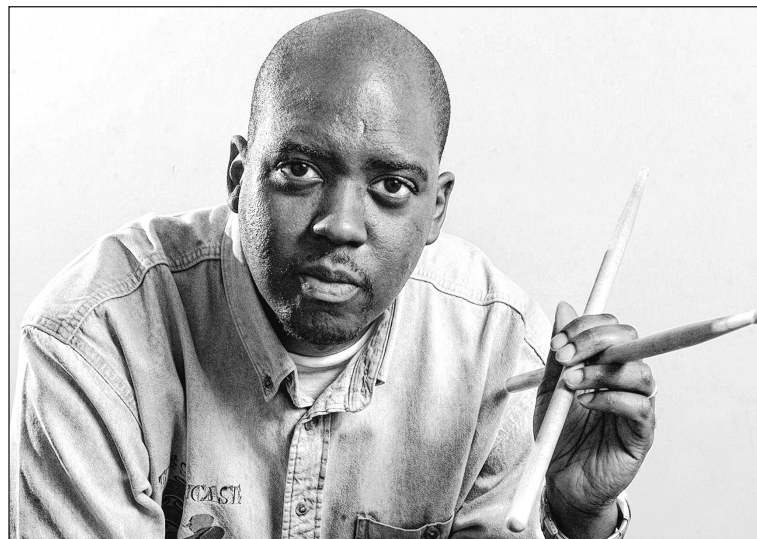
side gang member, out in the community. There are young brothers such as City Commissioner Andrew Gillum and state Rep. Alan Williams, and the seasoned, old-school cats in former state Sen. Al Lawson and Florida A&M president James H. Ammons.

Anderson and Barnhart, though, represent a vantage point in black history that largely goes unexpressed today.

The novelist Ralph Ellison, living in a time and place bereft of many black heroes, took instruction from the jazz musicians who'd played in the honky-tonks, at rent parties, and in the ballrooms of yore, writing of his first real life experience of jazz, in an essay celebrating Duke Ellington's birthday:

"Ellington and his great orchestra came to town — came with their uniforms, their sophistication, their skills, their golden horns, their flights of controlled and disciplined fantasy. ... They were news from the great wide world, an example and a goal."

Furthermore, he'd wish that those who "write so knowledgeably about Negro



boys having no masculine figures with whom to identify" would look at Ellington and the "thousands of one-night stands" of many jazz musicians — a call to which sociologists such as James Q. Wilson should pay heed. Really, all of us.

Jazz obviously demands a nightly display of skill, which comes through grinding practice. But it's more than that. There's the poise and professionalism. There's the regal pageantry of being part of a great tradition, being curators but also living examples of a still-persistent

and persevering, constantly shifting and original art form..

If you go in for "Big Thinking," its a great racial metaphor for our creativity and resilience. But for blacks and for black men, it represents something in its mostly male practitioners that is close to manhood, or an ideal of manhood that is sorely lacking today.

It's not straight-laced or suburban — it still maintains its irreverence and earthy and cosmopolitan qualities, as I saw when Leon Anderson gave his

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attention to a few music students during a break between sets.

It's seriousness laced with humor, a measure of good will and openness, an ability to see the goodness in life, rejoice in it, but also see the blues. And it doesn't mind being tough about life by laughing in its face — a great example being Barnhart's 2009 album "Say It Plain."

Recently, I was reading an old essay of James Baldwin on Earl Hines, a great hot-dog pianist who'd played with Louis Armstrong in the ground-breaking "Weather Bird" — part of Armstrong's original Hot Fives and Hot Sevens side. Baldwin writes about the toiling of male jazz musicians such as Hines in an era of racial turmoil and indignity, when for example, they had to wait when traveling in Pullman cars until all the white diners would leave, before they all could gather to eat:

"And, it seems to me, it is because these men were doing something, and knew what they were doing, that they could call upon vast reserves of generosity, be so free of bitterness and evince so little need to prove their manhood."

Baldwin writes that because the segregationists were children due to their petty ways, these musicians, like other black men of their time, had no need to prove what was inside of them.

They had the self-assuredness and pride in the seriousness of their art that I saw in Leon Anderson and Scotty Barnhart that night playing their instruments to a full house, but also a confidence about their manhood and their place in this world so many of our young black men need, and now.