



THE MUSICIAN AS PRESENTER

By Ted Panken Photo by Jimmy Cho

Late in August, Marty Ashby, DownBeat's 2025 Lifetime Achievement Award for Presenting honoree, was on Zoom describing the day Bill Strickland, his boss and good friend, hired him as executive producer of MCG Jazz.

It happened in mid-September, 1987, when Ashby, 26, was beginning his second season as manager of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra's telemarketing office. He was supervising a "staff of 60 working three shifts" to "sell millions of dollars' worth of tickets and raise millions for the institution over the phone." Ashby also was playing guitar in local venues, while producing club concerts and small-scale festivals, as he'd done since his undergraduate years at Ithaca College, where he majored in classical guitar. As a sophomore, "tired of smoky bars" after playing professionally with his father's family band since age 8, Ashby launched the Ithaca Jazz Festival.

For the second edition, in 1982, Ashby booked Paquito D'Rivera and the Havana New York Quintet, including Claudio Roditi and Portinho. Their manager, Helen Keane, supported Ashby's projects after he moved to New York in spring 1983, as did Roditi, who taught him Brazilian nuances on gigs with Ivan Lins and Duduka DaFonseca. Ashby soon took a "third job" selling tickets from the New York Philharmonic's phone room via a third-party contractor, which promoted him to telemarketing manager at the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra in January 1984.

"I got an on-the-job Ph.D. in how to do marketing, promotion, fundraising, development,

etc.," Ashby said. "Opera, theater, ballet, modern dance, symphony orchestras — I call them OPAs, for Other Performing Arts — had a level of infrastructure that I didn't see in jazz." He conceived and began to proselytize a path toward creating a national jazz subscription series to place "great jazz artists like Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach and Carmen McRae, who were still alive and bringing it," in classical venues.

Having fleshed out his back story, Ashby reset to Pittsburgh circa 1987. Guitarist Emily Remler, then a Steel City resident dating his younger brother, trombonist Jay Ashby, asked them to help her scope out a new venue in an industrial park on the dilapidated north side that wanted to book her. Strickland greeted them at the front door of the Manchester Bidwell Corporation's year-old headquarters, designed by a student of Frank Lloyd Wright, in which Strickland had consolidated the operations of Bidwell Training Center, an adult vocational and technical education program he'd run since 1971, and the arts-oriented Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, an arts organization he'd founded in 1968.

Strickland ended the tour at MCG's just-completed music hall, an acoustically pristine, 350-seat space with two-track and eight-track analog recorders installed in the projec-

tion booth tech deck. "I built this because jazz music saved my life, but I need somebody to run it," Strickland told Ashby, who responded, "Mr. Strickland, we need to talk." Strickland suggested the next morning at 9. "I stayed up half the night writing a proposal," Ashby said. "I talked about creating a jazz subscription series, but also an educational program, an attempt to synergize Pittsburgh's jazz ecosystem, and archiving the concerts."

"Bill gave me the keys to the front door," Ashby said, displaying them for the Zoom camera. "He said, 'Have a nice life.'"

The cumulative metrics of Ashby's 38-season stewardship are impressive, bearing out the remarks of Ken Kimery, the recently retired Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra and Jazz Oral History Program director, who noted, "Marty has approached this as a producer, a performer, a businessman, a conservator, a curator and a scholar." He's presented more than 2,000 concerts. He's overseen 70-plus albums for MCG's eponymous label (including five Grammy winners and 10 more Grammy nominations) on more than half of which he played.

"He's established a robust educational program in Pittsburgh and neighboring West Virginia, hosted over 300 radio programs during the last seven years, sponsored 34 oral histories with Pittsburgh jazzfolk, produced the award-winning documentary *We Knew What We Had* on Pittsburgh's distinguished jazz history. The archive holds 350,000-plus photos, a catalog of 3,100 works of commissioned and arranged music, 41,000-plus hours of video footage, and more than 25,000 hours of audio recording."

"Marty is a pragmatic visionary," said Todd Barkan, a friend since 1983, when he moved to New York after closing San Francisco's famous Keystone Korner. "He doesn't behave like he's presenting and the musician is on the other side."

Early plaudits for MCG from several nonsense veterans support those assertions. In May 1989, late in MCG's second season, Dizzy Gillespie told Strickland after his tour, "You think like a jazz musician." Strickland responded, "I don't play music." Gillespie retorted, "Yes, you do; this school is your song; I am going to tell everybody about this place." A few months earlier, Pittsburgh-born Ahmad Jamal told Ashby and Strickland to join him at Steinway Brothers in New York as he tested five Steinway D pianos, chose his favorite and gifted it to MCG, which deployed it until 2019.

"We dedicated that piano to Ahmad on stage," Strickland said. "Marty had everyone in his rolodex. They came because of him. But they fell in love with the center, and many became friends for life."

At 64, Ashby responds to inevitable questions about retirement with, "And do what?" "I'm pretty sure I'm still useful here. I think our best days are ahead."

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