



The Aardvark Jazz Orchestra opens its 50th anniversary concert season at MIT's Kresge Auditorium. Inset: bandleader Mark Harvey.

Aardvark Jazz Orchestra: 50 Years, a Special Calling

MARK HARVEY IS A BOSTON JAZZ LUMINARY like no other. He's long been an important person on the scene as founder and musical director of the Aardvark Jazz Orchestra, a local institution now celebrating its 50th anniversary. He's also made his shining mark as a jazz educator at MIT and as a social-minded Methodist minister who has provided many musicians with spiritual guidance.

Recent Aardvark concerts — notably a combined gold anniversary/MIT retirement celebration and an annual Christmas Concert benefit — keep Harvey and his 15 Aardvarks at the forefront of jazz in the Hub. The next performance by the band, on April 29, Duke Ellington's birthday, promises to be yet another memorable show. In addition to the Ellington material, Harvey plans to premier a new work he composed and showcase another original piece titled "The Seeker," inspired by John Coltrane.

"The band members regard themselves as a family," Harvey said in discussing Aardvark's group chemistry. "They are extremely loyal to the band, with some members coming from New Jersey, Vermont, Maine and sometimes New York City to participate."

The full Aardvark roster is loaded with longevity: Harvey, trumpet (50 years); Cheatham (46), Peter Bloom (46), Phil Scarff (35), Chris Rakowski (20) and Dan Zupan (24) on saxophones and woodwinds; KC Dunbar (32) and Jeanne Snodgrass (33) on trumpets; Bob Pilkington (39), Jay Keyser (35) and Jeff Marsanskis (41) on trombones; Bill Lowe (27) on bass trombone and tuba; Richard Nelson (35) on guitar; Jesse Williams (10) on string bass; Harry Wellott (39) on drums; and Grace Hughes, a newbie (18) on vocals.

"The band's sound is related to the sense of esprit de corps," Harvey said. "The way people

hear each other and relate to one another musically shapes the sound. I write for individual voices within the band, and these particularities are heard within the group sound to give a distinctive flavor. In terms of evolution, I would say that the addition of a new player or even a substitute player is part and parcel of this development. Also, we are fortunate that all of our reed players have multiple doubles, triples, etc., so that we have a wonderful woodwind capability in the music as well as a formidable sax section sound."

Aardvark has developed its musical character based on a deep knowledge of jazz history and the acceptance of other genres and arts. "The eclecticism has grown far beyond any original expectations," Harvey says. "Aardvark has performed my original compositions and arrangements and classics from the jazz tradition, with a very large Ellington/Strayhorn book within our overall band book, and we also have Basie, Herman, Gillespie and other standard bearers represented. [Plus] American music by Ives and Gottschalk, world music and collaborations with dance, film, poetry, choral, chamber, and symphonic ensembles."

"I prefer doing original compositions to arranging other composers' works. My compositions display quite a variety of moods, tempos, textures and styles. And for much of the band's existence, I've put emphasis on extended compositions and suites, modeled on Ellington. Many of these are among my best works, I feel, and often are documented on recordings."

Of 15 albums, he mentions 1995's *Paintings For Jazz Orchestra* (Leo) as a particular favorite. The titular six-movement suite is, he says, "based entirely in a conducted improvisation approach, showing the band's versatility and creativity."

Back in 1968, after leaving his native south-central New York State to study at Boston University's School of Theology, Harvey began

developing what's known as his Jazz/Arts Ministry. Melding jazz and religion, encouraged by his like-minded mentor Reverend John Gensel in the New York jazz community, he found a welcoming concert home at historic Old West Church in Boston's West End, where he did his ministerial internship.

"I initiated the Jazz Celebration performance series and organized the non-profit Jazz Coalition," Harvey said. "Through this, I initiated the Jazz All Night concert tradition [1971–'83] and Boston Jazz Walk [beginning in 1973]. I also had an octet [that] morphed into an improvisational quartet, through which I explored an avant-garde aesthetic."

Aardvark: The Boston Brass Ensemble started off in 1973 with a concert benefiting victims of a local fire. "An aardvark is an eclectic animal, and our program was to be eclectic with jazz, classical brass chorales, gospel music and an avant-garde improvisation around a Brother Blue story [Blue was a beloved street performer]. The concert drew a standing-room-only audience. Then, over the next few years, saxophones would be added, the number of brass reduced. And so, by about the late 1970s, the group had begun to look and sound more like a jazz big band."

Aardvark continued to flourish. Among the group's performance high points the past half century are a collective impression gala with Jaki Byard (1986), a 25th Christmas Concert (1997) featuring Sheila Jordan and a Duke Ellington Centennial Concert (1999) with two choirs and a tap dancer.

Still energized, Harvey continues to fight for human improvement. "I feel the opportunity to address spiritual and socially conscious themes in my music and through Aardvark is part of my calling as a minister and an educator. And I am most grateful to have a powerful vehicle like the band to express all of this." —Frank-John Hadley