

Honor the Work



Respect the Workers

Jackson delivers diversity message via music

By Vivian Smith

For the past 20 years, Andrew Jackson, Sr. has used music as a bridge for people to discuss uneasy issues involving race, class, gender and sexuality. Jackson wholeheartedly believes Bob Marley struck the right chord when he said, "Music is the spiritual healing force of the universe."

This seasoned percussionist, who moved from banging on his mama's pots and empty oatmeal boxes in Chester, Pa., to playing with the Penn State Blue Band, says his passion is to bring people together to talk about diversity.

"Most people in State College don't know about the work I do on a national level. They just see me as the drummer at Bar Bleu or Tony's Big Easy," Jackson said.

In addition to his 9 to 5 as an academic adviser and rocking three sets at the club every weekend, Jackson serves as district director of the Pennsylvania chapter of the National Association for Multicultural Education and president of the Penn State chapter of Phi Delta Kappa International Education Association.

"Most people are in denial about the impact of race and ethnicity in their life and about racial identity issues in the community," said Jackson, who added that he watched for years as people made excuses for not having courses on diversity at Penn State. As part of his dissertation and in an effort to fill that void, he designed an experimental course on multicultural perspectives to help break down racial stereotypes and ethnic barriers among teachers, students, faculty, staff and citizens, he said.

After receiving positive feedback from the students, Jackson offered to teach the

course himself, expecting an enthusiastic response from the university. Instead, a university official said he could teach it only as an evening course, and Penn State would not pay him to teach since he was already on payroll as an adviser, Jackson said.

But his parents, Lucius and Essie Mae Jackson, always told him to "work twice as hard and expect half as much." So now he uses music to support what the university would not.

"It's easier to talk about race, sexual orientation, identity issues and ethnicity when you have something in common to identify with—food, music, art, religion, dance,

concerts a year. He also helps coordinate the music at the Noon Concert Series in the HUB.

It is only fitting that Jackson's enthusiasm for diversity is mirrored in his musical career. From reggae to merengue, he plays all musical genres. Jackson has accompanied a wide array of musicians, especially local artists. He played with Tommy Wareham and his former student, jazz organist Joey DeFrancesco, who toured with Miles Davis. His bands have opened for big names like Earth, Wind and Fire in 1970 and Ziggy Marley in 1988. He has played the drums for the Andrew Jackson



Dr. Andrew Jackson is an academic advisor by day and a band leader by night.

"At one point, I was the only African-American in the Blue Band...I had to learn how to establish a voice when you're outnumbered and not have to use 'the race card' because it creates defensiveness, hostility and tension in any forum. I had to use talent and wit to create friendships and support. I have survived the past 20 years at Penn State with that formula."

--Andrew Jackson

education and culture," he explained in a separate interview. "Ordinarily, most people like to avoid discussing these kinds of topics."

In keeping with his belief that music and the arts help people open up about diversity, Jackson has helped organize a host of concerts over the years to connect people. The Festival of Cultures Concert in 1986 and the People's Choice Festival Concerts in 1988 are two. More recently, in the summer of 2002, Jackson started the Noon Concert Series at the Penn State Downtown Theater Center with Dan Carter, creating 40

Jazz Ensemble, Deacons of Dixieland, Essence of Joy, Gypsy and Crazy Moon, Jazz Show Case, Smoking Bananas, State College Municipal Band, Urban Fusion and fifteen years with Earthtones.

"I really enjoy working with Andrew," said Carl Ector, violinist. "He's a great musician...very much a people person, and he loves what he does. I think he's undervalued as a musician because he's not getting paid what he's worth."

As president of Local 660, the Central Pennsylvania arm of the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), Jackson

would say none of the musicians are fairly compensated in State College. Since some local gigs are non-union jobs, there are no contracts—and no accountability. For example, as Ector explained, "If someone hires us for \$500, they can call you back at the last minute and say we found someone who will do it for \$200. [And] as long as you're in a college town, you'll have students who'll play for a beer and a sandwich. If there was [a strong] union, that would not happen."

When Jackson joined AFM in 1974 and then Local 660 in 1986, there were more than 100 members. As president, he wants to recruit new members and strengthen the union.

"If you were getting fair wages, you wouldn't need a union. You get more respect as a group, because as an individual, you'll get squashed," he said. "There has to be a feeling of solidarity: If I eat, you eat."

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