Jazz inspirations nurtured at DSU

It was a very unique and jazzy decade of the 1990s for Delaware State University’s Department of Music.

Alumni Otis Brown III and Dr. Carlton “Butch” Cannon, graduates of that period, were both members of the then-locally popular DSU-based jazz group Three Guys So Far. Cannon joined the group shortly after its creation by trumpet player Nelson Render, pianist Trendle Thomas and drummer Al Holmes. Brown joined the jazz combo after the departure of the original drummer. Later, Cannon enlisted Brown to be part of his group Jabari.

Both jazz groups were part of their undergraduate experiences, as they performed throughout Delaware and beyond.

At the same time, the musicians were introduced to the late jazz legend Dr. Donald Byrd, who became an artist-in-residence at DSU. The renowned trumpet player and band leader became an inspiration and mentor to both Brown and Cannon, who both note his instrumental contribution to their musical success.

Otis Brown III ’97, shown with his wife, Paula, has released an album with the famed Blue Note Label.

Alumnus Otis Brown III has broken into a select professional jazz music stratosphere, becoming the first Delaware State graduate to release his own music album on a major jazz label. And even more remarkable — he has done so as a jazz drummer.

Not bad for someone who originally believed at DSU that his destiny was as a music educator.

Brown, a 40-year-old drummer from the Class of 1997, has released the album “The Thought of You,” a jazz work that instrumentally and vocally tells the story of his life, with the famed Blue Note Label.

Prior to his ascent as a featured recording artist, he solidly established himself as an in-demand jazz drummer, performing with celebrated artists such as Herbie Hancock, Terence Blanchard, Oliver Lake, Esperanza Spalding, Joe Lovano and others.

His music livelihood is hardly surprising, as his childhood and subsequent DSU years reveal a life destined for a career in the industry.

Raised in Newark, N.J., his father Otis Brown Jr. was a former drummer for the “Godfather of Soul” James Brown; he later became a music educator (including being his son’s high school band director) before becoming a school administrator. Brown III’s mother Dr. Norma Fair-Brown is a pianist, music educator and minister of music at the family church, New Hope Baptist in Hackensack, N.J.

Another influence was his godfather Bernard Purdie, a renowned drummer.
Otis Brown III, right, and Randolph Johnson, current DSU director of bands, caught up at Homecoming 2014. "He was huge for me," Brown said of Johnson during his DSU years. "Randolph Johnson took care of me when I was there."

LEFT: Brown and his wife, the former Paula Fairfax, met during his undergraduate years. She attended DSU for three years and then moved north with Brown after his graduation, completing her teaching degree at Kane University. The couple has two children. Photographs by Carlos Holmes

A unique album feature is the inclusion of a few Christian gospel-themed jazz compositions.

"I was just trying to tell my story on the album and that covers a lot of bases, me growing up in the inner city, me going to a black college and listening to a lot of different music," Brown said. "The church was always there and still is. That is the foundation of my music, where I first heard music." He said he signed a three-record deal with Blue Note and expects to begin recording his next album sometime in 2015. He will also do a performing tour and deal with Blue Note and expects to begin recording his next album sometime in 2015. He will also do a performing tour.

When it came to the Homecoming weekend Fall into Jazz concert, alumnus Dr. Carlton “Butch” Cannon Jr. was instrumental in making it happen. Cannon spearheaded the event along with co-promoter Joe Baione, bringing longtime stellar jazz and R&B vibraphonist and vocalist Roy Ayers Jr. and other artists to campus in October. The concert was considered a success by the University, but the real miracle was how Cannon found the time to play such a critical role.

The life pursuits of Cannon, a Class of 1999 graduate of the University’s music program, have flowered into a number of diverse areas, including being the director of bands at the Cab Calloway School of the Arts in Wilmington, Del., and a top-notch musician who performs his saxophone in jazz and gospel praise and worship genres, as well as an ordained bishop in the Church of God denomination and an associate pastor at the Clarence Street Church of God in Seaford, Del.

In addition, Cannon is part of the executive board of the American Federation of Musicians, Local 23, which represents the interests of professional musicians throughout Delaware and parts of Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia. He also serves as the coordinator of the Delaware All-State Jazz Program, which is organized under the Delaware Music Educators Association.

Randolph Johnson, current DSU director of bands, says he is not surprised by his former student’s success.

‘He always had the potential, work ethic and character,” Johnson said. “I knew that he would be successful at whatever he chose to do.”

The son of Carlton Sr. and Lettie Banks Cannon grew up as a “military brat” and spent a large part of his childhood in Japan, where his father was stationed as a U.S. Marines officer. There, he was raised by the military discipline of his father (a battalion commander) and the Christian values of his parents, and he was immersed in a Japanese culture that emphasized honor and respect.

It was in Japan where Cannon was introduced to music, at first being inspired by an appearance by jazz saxophonist Grover Washington Jr. on the children’s show “Sesame Street.” Through his youth he received instruction by military musicians.

He returned to the U.S. after his high school graduation and enrolled in then-Delaware State College in 1991. However, his narrow view of what he wanted to do musically at the historically black university did not sit well with Johnson.

“I told Mr. Johnson that I only wanted to play in the DSU Jazz Band, but he told me I couldn’t unless I played in the other bands of the program,” Cannon said. “For that reason, I didn’t play in the
MICHAEL FEENEY ‘05 SHARES EXPERIENCE WITH STUDENTS AT 2014 CONVOCATION

Michael Feeney ‘05 helped to launch the 2014-2015 academic year as keynote speaker of the 2014 Convocation.

An award-winning journalist who graduated with a degree in Mass Communications/Print Journalism, Feeney told the audience that his DSU undergraduate experience prepared him well for his career—which has included jobs with the Associated Press and the New York Daily News, as well as recognition from the National Association of Black Journalists as the 2010 Emerging Journalist of the Year.

“All of that wouldn’t have been possible without DSU,” he said. “I urge each one of you to take advantage of the opportunities you have here, because what you do here will ultimately determine what you will do after you graduate.”

Feeney told the students to surround themselves with people who want to achieve and be successful.

“Figure out your goals and do whatever you have to do to achieve them,” he said. “If you face adversity, find a way to get through it. If you fail, get up. If you find success, keep it going and be the best Hornet you can be.”

Photo by Carlos Holmes