

# Jazz director retires baton

By CHRISTINA PALM  
*Jambar Editor*

The Jazz Ensemble I at YSU has won many awards across the country, including being named Outstanding Band at jazz festivals several times. Graduates from the Dana School of Music have gone on to everything from the recording industry to television to freelance musicianship as well as joined big bands.

The YSU music program, specifically the jazz program, has made a name for itself nationwide — and many people at the university credit Tony Leonardi with that recognition.

Leonardi, coordinator of jazz studies and instructor of string bass at Dana, has been a part of the faculty at YSU since 1979. Previous to that, he received both his bachelor's and master's degrees in music education from this university. At the end of this semester, he will be retiring from teaching.

Dr. Stephen Gage, director of bands, has worked with Leonardi since 1993 but first met him in the late '80s.

"I first heard the Jazz I band in Syracuse, N.Y., at the state jazz educator's conference when I was a high school teacher. I was very impressed with the band, and when I found out there was a job opening at YSU in 1993, I was very interested," he said.

One of Leonardi's former students who graduated



**ONE AND TWO:** Leonardi directing Jazz I in the '90s.

in 1998, Jeff Bush, is in his first year of graduate school at the Manhattan School of Music and also plays music in New York.

"Tony is the jazz program at YSU. The program was pretty much the only reason I came to YSU," Bush said.

Gage said, "[Leonardi] is a true music educator who cares very much about Dana. He's one of the finest music educators around. I've worked closely with Tony, and we've talked a lot about the music program. He's a great

resource in understanding why things are the way they are."

Dr. Kent Engelhardt, an instructor at Dana and jazz ensemble director, has worked with Leonardi for the past 10 years.

"He was my teacher first, and then we got to be good friends. He called me one day while I was out touring and asked if I wanted to come back and teach and get my master's at the same time," he said. "It's been a great experience to have Tony as a teacher, colleague and friend."

Dr. Michael Crist, an associate professor at Dana, said, "He taught me a high level of music standards. No matter what, it just has to be good, and that's something you take with you wherever you go."

Gage called Leonardi's teaching "demanding but fair," and both students and former students tend to agree with this description.

Another of Leonardi's former students who graduated from YSU in 1997, Jason Rigby, is a jazz musician in New York and recently graduated from the Manhattan School of Music with his master's degree.

"Tony gave everyone equal attention if you showed you put



**JAMMING:** Leonardi playing bass at the Dana Showcase Concert in 1997.

See **RETIRE**, page 7

work into it. His standards were high, and he was always relentless," he said. "When I came to Manhattan, I realized what a great situation I was in to have him [as a professor]."

Bush agreed.

"Tony certainly prepared us for the real world. He could be hard on us, but he really prepared us, and he did it out of love. I understand that more as I get older. He wanted all the best for us," he said. "He made me mad sometimes, but I still called him Uncle Tony."

James Suggs, junior, jazz performance, said of Leonardi, "I learned a lot from him, and I didn't start appreciating it until he wasn't teaching anymore."

Leonardi did not teach this semester due to illness.

Bryan Connell, junior, jazz performance, said, "Freshman year I thought I had my stuff together when I came here. Tony just tore me apart. He's really strict in what he believes in. At the time it really made me angry, but looking back I realized it's totally what I needed."

Engelhardt said, "Tony has a way of motivating people and getting them to reach and surpass their potential while performing. I've never known anyone more dedicated to his work."

Leonardi received an award for his outstanding service to jazz education in 1977 from the National Association of Jazz Educators. In 1986, the Ohio unit of NAJE voted him "Jazz Educator of the Year," and in 1991 he received the Distinguished Professor Award at YSU.

Crist said, "Tony is a unique person. He's not afraid to share everything he knows with you. He runs a gamut of emotions, from as high as a kid to really low. I think that's part of what scares people. His ability to bring out the same in others is important to do as a musician."

Gage said, "For many years Tony has carried the weight of the school on his shoulders. He's built up the jazz program through the quality of students he has attracted to YSU. The product speaks for itself."

The reputation Leonardi has built of the school follows his students wherever they go.

"When I first when to Manhattan, the people there knew me as 'Tony's guy.' YSU has a good reputation," Bush said.

Gage said, "The legacy, expectations, quality and tradition Tony established of the school will long be here."

As a professional bass player, Leonardi has been associated with such big band names as Woody Herman, Stan Kenton, Buddy Rich

and Chuck Mangione. He has performed with jazz players such as Bob Mintzer, Marvin Stamm, James Moody, Harold Danko and Ralph Lalama. He has also toured in Europe with his own jazz quintet as well as the Woody Herman Band.

Rigby said, "He came from a great history. He played with so many jazz greats and got to use those experiences in his teaching."

Connell echoed this observation.

"Tony always had a story to tell about the performers we were going to meet or listen to. You can trust what he says because he lived through all the periods of music," he said.

Gage said, "The greatest gift Tony has given has been the distinguished alumni that have come out of Dana, everyone from composers to performers. They are some of the leading artists in their fields. It is rare that a performance of a big band in America doesn't trace back to YSU."

Engelhardt agreed and said so many highly successful students have graduated from YSU and gone into a variety of careers, such as TV writers, teachers, composers, arrangers and band directors.

Under Leonardi's direction, the Jazz Ensemble was named Outstanding Band at the 1976 Wichita Jazz Festival and at the Central Ohio Jazz Festivals in 1980, 1982 and 1984. The band has performed at the Notre Dame and Cleveland Jazz Festivals.

"He has inspired so many people," Engelhardt said. "He has had such a deep impact on so many of us. He's not really leaving the school because we all carry a piece of him with us. Tony's a big part of what all of us are."

"Dana and Tony are synonyms," Gage said. "Tony has a heart of gold, and he will be really missed, by me personally and by the school collectively. I'm proud to be Tony's colleague and friend."

Engelhardt said, "Tony has been such an influential faculty member and one of the most influential teachers here."

Bush said, "I wish Tony the best and think about him all the time. I'm honored to say something about the cat."

Leonardi recorded four albums and appeared on television while with the Woody Herman Band.

He has done several other recordings, including nine conducting Jazz Ensemble I.

Most recently, the Jazz Ensemble scholarship was renamed the Tony Leonardi Scholarship in his honor.

Engelhardt said, "Tony will be sorely missed in retirement. We hope to see him back in the fall for extended teaching service."

Leonardi was unavailable for comment. He has not been teaching this semester as he is currently battling pancreatic cancer.