



School of Arts and Sciences
(732) 364-2200, Ext 2624
FAX: (732) 905-8571

Georgian Court University

900 Lakewood Avenue
Lakewood, New Jersey 08701-2697
www.wittemann@georgian.edu

Wilbur Wittemann
Director of Bands
Director of Jazz Studies

In case you've been in seclusion since Feb 14, 2009 Louie Bellson died. Besides being guaranteed the right of passage to heaven because of what he did for furthering the God given gift of music there isn't a person anywhere that wouldn't agree that Louie was the sweetest man. Peter Erskine has some very profound and appropriate thoughts about his hero on the Hudson Music Louie tribute page. www.hudsonmusic.com. My Louie story starts when Louie Bellson came to Lakewood to perform with the Lakewood Jazz Ensemble two times. In 1993 he was the guest artist for our 5th Music Spectacular Jazz Festival. I learned a lot a Louie and his new wife Francine when they visited Lakewood in 1993. Louie was the first guest artist to ever say "If my schedule permits I'll come a few days ahead of the festival to help promote it" I said sure! What shall we do? He said "Set up some mini visits (clinics) to area schools and try to arrange stops at locations you think will help sell tickets." For two days before the festival we drove around in my Class C motor home to various schools and locations. As you can imagine it was a joy to hang with this legend and gentleman. I asked him what should I charge the schools and he said just tell them to buy tickets to the shows. Some of the escapades about the visits are worth repeating because it tells about Louie as a person of high esteem. As you should know Louie is revered by the drum world. Just look at all the postings on the internet proclaiming him as the greatest. I enjoyed reading the posts about him on www.drumworld.com. Well a few days before Louie arrived in Lakewood I get a call from a drummer who has quite a collection of Louie records. He said to me Louie is his hero and would I be kind enough to ask him to sign his record collection. I said I'll ask and to bring me over the records. He brings them over in a box. There were at least 30 albums! I showed them to Louie and said if he wanted to while we were driving to the schools and other locations he might be able to sign some of the records. As fate would have it after a stop for gas the motor home would not start. We were stuck for about an hour. While I was fussing with the motor home Louie signed every record! Later after the concert Louie met the guy. It turned out the guy was a record collector and knew that a signed collectors set of Louie Bellson vintage records would be worth a lot of money. (This was 1993 before big time internet access and before the very popular eBay) I felt like the guy had taken advantage of me and Louie. I apologized to Louie and he said its ok "Lets hope he brought friends to the show!" I'll bet somewhere on eBay is the "Ultimate autographed Louie Bellson record collection" Let's hope this guy makes a nice donation to the Louie Bellson Scholarship Fund.

We had two other PR stops on our trip that are worth mentioning. On the way to schools we stopped at various businesses that had donated to the Jazz Festival ad journal. Louie Bellson went into Dominic's Pizza to shake the hand of the owners Tony and Marie. (They spoke only

Italian) Louie Bellson went inside the Route 70 Bowling Alley to shake hands with patrons while we passed out flyers about the Jazz festival.

Now let me reminisce about Louie at the 1993 Music Spectacular Jazz Festival. First off attendance was great. Over the years I've learned that even if a drummer hasn't played drums in years former drummers will always come to see a world class drummer. There are zillions of want to be drummers. That's why in later years I hired Butch Miles and Dave Weckl as guest artists with my band. They all filled the theater with fans. Louie was not only a drum legend but also a world class musician. He drew an audience of drummers and musicians (pun intended!) Louie worked hard for 11 hours. He performed two concerts and worked with High School bands like the gifted master educator he was.

At the dress rehearsal for the concert we ran through the music Louie sent me. He graciously congratulated me on the job I did preparing the band. After rehearsal a few guys in the band hinted that Louie played great but thought he was beginning to show his 68 years of age. I said I hope he was saving it for the show! Well boy did he prove them wrong! They all admitted after the festival that he still had it. Take a look at the video clips of him with the band. He does at least a 10 minute solo on some cuts. All the trade mark Louie tricks. 4 sticks at once, incredible brush solo, jingle bells on the cymbals, awesome power, speed and finesse. The epitome of economy of motion and technique. Last tidbit of the 1993 Louie visit. Guess where he wanted to go to dinner after the festival? If you said Dominics Pizza ...you were right! Owners Tony and Marie treated me, Louie, Francine, Denny DiBlasio, and a few other guys from the band to an Italian feast! Thanks to Louie's earlier kindness we ate and drank red wine like Kings. It was a hang we still talk about.

About a week after he left I found out that he and Francine went to a Baptist church while in town. That church visit led to the 1995 gig with Louie and even more memories. The church wanted to do a fundraising concert. Louie came to town with Francine and his daughter Dee Dee. While in town they did a motivational assembly at Lakewood Middle School for 7th and 8th graders. Louie opened the assembly with him on drums and talked to the kids about how hard work would lead to success in any endeavor they chose. Then he introduced his wife Francine who is a brilliant woman with a degree in Science. She spoke to the kids about taking their education seriously. We closed the assembly with Dee Dee singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Francine taught science classes the rest of the day!

Dee Dee went shopping with my buddy's wife. Guess what Louie and I did???? You got it.... we went to a few schools to "drum up" business for the church fundraiser. As it turned out, due to poor planning, the church actually had two different fund raising events the night of the concert. That had a dramatic effect on concert attendance. I think we performed for less then 100 people. Luckily I had learned something from performing with Dizzy. Put in the contract "Full balance of payment due during intermission....." Before the start of the concert Louie told the band "Let's give these people a concert they will never forget" He performed flawlessly as usual and conversed openly with audience members as in an intimate setting. He was the ultimate pro.

God took Louie to be with him on Valentines Day February 14th 2009. It figures because Louie was a real sweetheart.

Wilbur Wittemann

Director Lakewood Jazz Ensemble
www.lakewoodjazz.com