Research Grant – Spring 2009

Title or Proposal: Jazz Saxophonist/Composer Jack Wilkins “Blue and Green” Project

Faculty member: Jack Wilkins

Unit: School of Music

Abstract: “Blue and Green” is a composition project and performance recording/documentation of jazz saxophonist Jack Wilkins. The project involves creating a set of new jazz based compositions influenced by Blue Ridge mountain environments, culture and arts (the “green” reference), written in a style informed by American roots music (the “blue” reference). Funds will be used to pay for travel to mountain sites for research and to meet with mountain artists and cultural specialists, to buy a digital recorder for field recordings, and to pay for the recording expenses, including studio fees and musician fees and travel.

Proposal:

“Blue and Green” is a composition project culminating in a recording. This project is a themed, conceptual art piece, drawing on musical elements of the color “blue”, found in American roots music (Jazz, Blues, Gospel) and environmental elements of the color “green”. For this project ”green” refers to the environment, culture and artistic traditions of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which will serve as inspirational elements for the individual compositions and improvisational concepts.

The goals for this project are:

1. To create a set of new innovative compositions for a jazz based, improvising performance group. These compositions will draw on the decidedly “non-jazz” influence of the arts, culture and environment of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I will use specific mountain influences to fuel the creative realization of each composition, each will be a unique work inspired by a particular location, art/craft, literary work, or other mountain
Compositions in the conceptual stage, or already in progress include **Blue Vibe**, a composition influenced by the barren landscape found on Roan Mountain, an environmental phenomenon known as “the balds”; a composition inspired by traditional hand hewn log cabin construction techniques from the *Foxfire* books (collections of mountain lore and traditions); and a composition inspired by legendary blacksmith Bea Hensley, whose craft includes “playing” the anvil - hammering on the anvil, moving the location of the strikes to change sounds and pitch while playing in a rhythmic style. The research needed to create this composition includes meeting with Bea to discuss his art of blacksmithing, how his creative process works, and to do a field recording of Bea “playing” the anvil to use in the compositional process, and perhaps as part of the final recording.

2. To record these compositions with a group of specifically selected musicians, whose experience and skill level allow for the highest possible musical interaction and creativity. I will use a quintet of experienced jazz musicians that bring highly developed skills, musicianship and open minds to the project. Field recordings of certain specialty “sounds” and performers of mountain music will be used for specific pieces.

The combination of Blue Ridge Mountain arts and culture and jazz music is a concept that has rarely been explored in the jazz field. As a North Carolina native and one who has lived in the mountain area, I bring a personal interest and insight to this project that most jazz artists could not. This is an opportunity for me to make a significant contribution in the jazz field and could also open opportunities in other arts arenas. The publication of this recording will be beneficial to my career and to the continued national and international visibility of the USF Jazz Studies program, School of Music, and College of the Arts. As my research area is as a jazz performer and composer, this project fulfills the research agenda of the unit, college and university by bringing newly created and innovative works of art into existence.