

KEEPIN' IT IN THE FAMILY

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MICHAEL JACKSON

ORBERT DAVIS IS A FAMILY MAN. WHEN Jazzgram met him at home in Beverly in Southwest Chicagoland, he was set to take his children to Basketball Camp. "I don't really participate in the camp myself," confessed Davis, "They call me 'security,' I just walk around and check no one steps out of line."

Orbert lives with wife Lisa and kids Zoe, 14, Sydney, 11, Donovan, 4, and Benjamin, 22 months. The girls are pretty self-sufficient, Zoe is a guitarist and Sydney plays the violin, but inevitably little Benjamin likes to sit on Daddy's knee when he is composing in his basement studio and make mischief. Donovan loves jamming with Dad and keeps impressively steady beats on the drumkit Orbert's business partner Mark Ingram bought for him.

Orbert's family is larger than the five people closest to him however and soon after our rendezvous he was ensconced with his CJP/UIC Jazz Academy—150 hopefuls to oversee and inspire. "We have fifty returning students this summer—a pretty good ratio," said Davis,

whose belief in the camp and his longrunning Jazz Alive initiative, promoting music study to at risk kids, is close to missionary zeal.

Orbert is loyal to his flock and that includes musicians who were important to him on the way up. He's not overeager to ally with out-of-town marquee names. "Why do I need guest musicians when I have Ari Brown and Ernie Adams in my band?" he asked with pride.

With that said there are a few associates he wanted to call on for this year's Chicago Jazz Festival, since his position as Artist in Residence affords him the luxury. The choices he made further reflect his commitment to jazz education, his own included. "I wanted to invite musicians from three phases of my career who inspired me," said Davis. "Years ago at the Bop Shop on Division I met a talented young pianist, 16 at the time, who is now MD for singer Nnenna Freelon. His name is Brandon McCune." Davis describes how theory crunching and philosophical powwows with the precocious McCune made him think



deeper about music, ultimately inspiring him to pursue his Masters at Northwestern.

"At NWU, a course requirement was also to teach, but I wasn't interested in teaching trumpet so Don Owens suggested I instruct other instrumentalists. That's how I got to know violinist Zach Brock." Davis claims he learned as much from Brock as he taught him. "I showed him concepts of phrasing like a trumpet player, space and timing issues necessary because of breath control. As a trade off he helped me understand violin bowings, taught me how to make violins swing in my writing for strings." Brock subsequently recorded with Davis on the trumpeter's *Priority* CD (3sixteen Records) and since moved to New York, but remains an undersung talent.

Orbert's third invitee is perhaps the most surprising. "[JIC Exec Director] Lauren Deutsch sent me to Poznan, Poland in 2009 to participate in the Made in Chicago series she curates at the festival there. I taught 57 students of all varieties, many who had never played jazz," recalled Davis. "But there was this young lady swinging like crazy on the bongos—Marianna Soroka. I asked her how she learnt to swing like that and she said 'I listened to your CD!'" he laughed. "Marianna owned it, she has a black soul, she is like a master drummer from Sudan who happens to be from Poznan!"

Davis will play with bassist Stewart Miller, Adams, and McCune in the cloistered Ganz Hall at Roosevelt University on September 2 at 5:00 p.m. "It'll mainly be ballads with the new flugelhorn I had Schilke make for me," said Davis, "and Brandon and I will include some gospel interstices between songs."

On September 3 at 7:10 p.m. on Grant Park's Petrillo Music Shell stage, Davis will present his 20 strong Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble with guests McCune, Brock, and Soroka. Among other material, including "El Moreno" his Moorish addition to Miles Davis/Gil Evans'



Sketches of Spain canon, the ensemble will premiere a new suite "Life," reflecting stages in Davis' development from P-Funk influences to classical and jazz. "It'll be a short musical journey reflecting my adolescence all the way up to middle age. A depiction of human development in a serious yet comical way. It won't take everything too seriously, it wouldn't reflect life if it did."

A group culled from the Orbert Davis Jazz Academy will play a short set at The Chicago Community Trust Young Jazz Lions Stage on September 4 at 3:20 p.m. after an appearance by Orbert's quintet with Brown (and possibly aforementioned guests) at 1:10 p.m. on the Jazz on Jackson Stage.

Yet another Orbert project, his 14 piece Brass Ensemble will appear in Millennium Park at noon on Wednesday, August 31. The material for that concert will include Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man," Davis' Mandela tribute "Fanfare for the Uncommon Man," and also his "Fanfare for Cloudgate," commissioned in 2005 in honor of Anish Kapoor's popular sculpture in the park, better known as "The Bean."