Arts & Humanities

Jazz ’til Dawn

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|
Fall 2003

Some high school seniors choose Columbia because of the chance to be taught by a Nobel Prize winner. Others want an abrupt change of scenery after an adolescence spent in a small town or a placid suburb. Katharine Digman ’03CC picked Columbia because of a jazz ballad.

“My favorite song when I was growing up in New Hampshire was John Coltrane’s ‘Central Park West,’” she says, referring to a languorous tune written and recorded by the jazz colossus for Atlantic Records in the ’50s. “I knew that Columbia was next to Central Park West, so I wanted to go there.”

Even if her Manhattan geography was off by a few blocks, Digman had no trouble finding the city’s jazz scene. Apart from the clubs, which may populate New York in greater density than anywhere else in the world, she took advantage of an academic environment that, early on, encouraged serious study and appreciation of jazz as an art rooted in African-American culture.

An art history major, she took plenty of music classes, including Assistant Professor Chris Washburne’s “History of Jazz” and Robin D. G. Kelley’s “Jazz and the Political Imagination”—her favorite course at Columbia because “it took a postmodern, unromanticized view of the jazz tradition.”

Best of all, she was able to educate herself at WKCR, the venerable radio station—now in its 63rd year—that has allowed so many Columbia undergraduates to deepen their understanding of music and broadcasting. She can be heard Sunday nights from 2 to 6 a.m. on Jazz ’til Dawn. “That’s where I started to learn about the music,” she says. “Half of what I play is stuff that I may not know but that I want to hear.”

The jazz tradition at KCR, fostered for decades by the irrepressible jazz historian Phil Schaap ’73CC (“he taught me to swing dance,” says Digman) and in recent years by Ben Young ’92CC, has made it a beacon for the New York City jazz community. The hundreds of interviews recorded with musicians has turned the station, now in Alfred Lerner Hall, into an invaluable historical archive.

Last January, the 22-year-old Digman decided that after graduation she would join her second passion, photography, to her first. Last year she haunted the Iridium Club, at Broadway and 51st Street, taking portraits of jazz musicians. Digman lives in central Harlem, around the corner from St. Nick’s Pub, a reincarnation of that legendary club Luckey’s Rendezvous, where pianists Luckey Roberts and Art Tatum once held court. She has become the unofficial photographer of St. Nick’s Sunday night jazz sessions, and she continues to do her radio show, which still features Coltrane. As a photographer, she longs to revive the lustrous style of Herman Leonard, William Gottlieb, and Alfred Lions, whose tenebrous, moody portraits of Billie Holiday and Thelonious Monk during the ’40s and ’50s transformed them into icons of the age.

“I want to make old-fashioned portraits,” she says, then laughs. “Except there’s no smoke in the clubs.”

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