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## Trumpeter Belgrave brought world-class music to Detroit

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When trumpeter Marcus Belgrave grew tired of life on the road in 1963 after five years with the Ray Charles Band, he could have settled in any city in the country. Belgrave, who had found New York cliquish and cold, considered Dallas, Los Angeles and Washington, D.C. But in the end he chose Detroit. Lucky us.

For 46 years, Belgrave's world-class musicianship, charisma, swing and commitment to mentoring young musicians -- many of whom have become stars -- have made Detroit a hipper city than it would have been without him. The Troy-based Kresge Foundation today is putting an exclamation point on a community's grateful affection by naming the 73-year-old patriarch of Detroit jazz the 2009 Kresge Eminent Artist. The \$50,000 prize recognizes Belgrave's lifetime contributions as a performer and teacher.

"This is richly deserved," says Wynton Marsalis, who played alongside Belgrave in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra. "He's the epitome of soul and of taste. His sound is just so evocative, and he's a master of swing and blues. When he walks into a room, he brings a good time with him."

In its second year, the Kresge Eminent Artist award has emerged as Detroit's most prestigious and lucrative award for an individual artist. Last year's winner was painter and sculptor Charles McGee. The award is part of the \$2.8-billion national foundation's multimillion-dollar annual investment in Detroit arts and culture, including support for institutions and individual artist fellowships.

The selection of Belgrave underscores the central position that jazz holds in Detroit's cultural fabric and the city's historic role as a feeder of talent to the national scene. The primary exports since the '80s include pianist Geri Allen, saxophonists Kenny Garrett and James Carter, violinist Regina Carter, bassists Bob Hurst and Rodney Whitaker and drummers Karriem Riggins and Ali Jackson. All were nurtured by Belgrave.

The Kresge prize might be thought of a reward for good works, though, as Belgrave says in his sandpaper rasp, "When you're giving, you don't think in those terms."

"I had a Christian upbringing -- it's more of a blessing to give than receive," says Belgrave. "It was something I could do in the community to make a difference."

Belgrave is speaking earlier this week at the Virgil H. Carr Cultural Arts Center, the newly renovated downtown home of the Arts League of Michigan, where he's artist-in-residence. An elfin 5 feet 4, he has a cherubic face loaded with dimples, a salt-and-pepper bebopper's beard and a high-beam smile you can see a mile away. He's wearing a dark pinstripe suit, no tie and a colorfully embroidered leather skull cap, the favorite of his many lids. The trumpet is an unforgiving instrument, but Belgrave's chops remain sterling. He plays with a honeyed sound rich with personality, and his improvisations unfold in graceful paragraphs of bebop melody. Comfortable in many idioms, Belgrave is equally at home in pure jazz settings, electronic music pioneer Carl Craig's jazz-techno world and Louis Armstrong's pre-bop style, where Belgrave's gravely vocals walk a deft line between homage and imitation. His daily routine includes an hour of trumpet calisthenics.

"I always think of Dizzy Gillespie saying, 'If you skip a day, you notice. If you skip two, everybody notices,'" he says.

Born in Chester, Pa., Belgrave was a bebop baby, soaking up early encouragement and inspiration from his cousin, baritone saxophonist Cecil Payne, and the hugely influential trumpeter Clifford Brown from nearby Wilmington, Del. -- the 12-year-old Belgrave even sat next to Brown in rehearsals of a circus-show band that played marches and the like.

Belgrave worked with Charles from 1958-63, except for a year in which he left the fold and lived in New York. He was lured to Detroit by the city's legacy as the hometown of a remarkable number of leading jazz musicians. The Motown studio provided steady work in the early days, but when the scene cooled in the late '60s and early '70s, Belgrave found sustenance in teaching. He credits his friend, the pianist and educator Harold McKinney, as an important role model.

Belgrave became associated with a string of community arts programs, school residencies and his own Jazz Development Workshop, shoestring operations supported by grit and a trickle of grant money. He also hired promising students for gigs around town. "Marcus heard all the clunkers," Allen once told the Free Press.

Whitaker says that Belgrave was so giving of his time and had so much passion for music that he inspired similar a intense enthusiasm in his students. "He loved to play and had such respect for all musicians, that he taught us that the music came first," he says. "If he hadn't landed here, then a lot of the kids, especially from the late '70s forward, would not have emerged from the scene. He was the light that kept the music going." Belgrave's decision to remain anchored in Detroit prevented his national profile from soaring higher, though musicians always knew there was a giant living in Detroit. There were fleeting associations during his career with Charles Mingus and Max Roach, plus his tenure with the Lincoln Center band. But Belgrave's discography is thin for a musician of his stature, encompassing a handful of recordings as a leader for local labels and few sideman appearances that capture him in peak form. When Belgrave played a rare club gig in a New York in 1992, New York Times critic Peter Watrous praised his work as "enormously musical," while noting that he was best known for his role as a teacher in Detroit.

Of course, it hasn't always been roses here for Belgrave, though in the last decade a visiting professorship at the Oberlin Conservatory in Ohio has brought more financial stability. Still, Belgrave is grateful to Detroit for providing him a livelihood and, in terms of teaching, a calling.

"I haven't had the hard drive to be a big star," he says. "I've often wondered what my fate was, but just to be happy doing what I'm doing I found to be the greatest success of all."

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## Additional Facts

Listen to Marcus Belgrave

Trumpeter Marcus Belgrave plays "Mean What You Say," a composition by Thad Jones, with the Tommy Flanagan Trio, including Flanagan on piano, Peter Washington on bass and Lewis Nash on drums. Recorded April 24, 1994 at the Kerrytown Concert House, Ann Arbor. From the CD "Marcus Belgrave with Detroit's Jazz Piano Legacy, Vol. 1" (Detroit Jazz Musicians Co-op). Belgrave CDs available at [marcusbelgrave.net](http://marcusbelgrave.net).

