



# THE TOWN RUMPET

BY JOHN JANOWIAK ★ PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL JACKSON



One of the city's most gifted trumpet players and composers,

**Orbert Davis** could have chosen to live the life of a jazz musician on the road. Instead, he stays well-rounded and firmly grounded in Chicago, fostering myriad musical and educational projects. As associate professor of music and director of jazz, his goal is to make UIC a hub of jazz education



**UIC Associate Professor Orbert Davis is one of Chicago's most in-demand trumpeters. He leads the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic, a 55-piece orchestra; heads a not-for-profit educational outreach company, Discover Music: Discover Life; and has performed more than 3,000 commercial jingles.**

**O**n a sunny afternoon in February, **Orbert Davis** is addressing about 100 students in a darkened UIC auditorium. His trumpet is near his side, as always, but today it isn't the focus of attention. Rather, Davis is teaching his jazz history course, and the topic happens to be one of his idols, Duke Ellington.

As images of Ellington and his orchestra flicker by on a PowerPoint projector, Davis describes the qualities that made Ellington the definitive big-band leader and one of the most important composers in American music. Duke's talents went beyond musicianship, Davis explains; he also brought charisma, a healthy image, leadership skills and business strengths to the table. And he had a talent for writing music that high-

lighted the special gifts of his sidemen. "It's often said that even though Duke played the piano, it was his orchestra that was his instrument," Davis tells the class.

Substitute "trumpet" for "piano," and this would be a fitting description of Davis himself. If his own success is any indication, Ellington's example has rubbed off on him in more ways than one. Besides being one of Chicago's most in-demand trumpeters and a UIC associate music professor, he spends his days and nights running a mind-boggling assortment of musical, educational and business endeavors. His most ambitious project is the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic, a 55-piece orchestra that interweaves jazz and classical styles. He also co-owns a music production company, Orbark



“I think we have the best jazz faculty in Chicago.”

Productions, and a not-for-profit educational outreach company called Discover Music: Discover Life.

Considering the breadth of his workload, Davis seems remarkably relaxed. He’s in his element here as he reflects on the unique styles of various Ellington sidemen, such as trumpeter James “Bubber” Miley. Davis picks up his trumpet, cups his hand over the bell and belts out a gritty, growling phrase to illustrate Miley’s plunger-mute technique. He plays with a big sound that easily fills the auditorium. Even the students in the back row sit up and take notice.

#### A LITTLE HELP FROM HIS FRIENDS

After class, a dozen eager students crowd around him to ask a succession of questions, ranging from “Will that be on the midterm?” to “Where can I find out more about Sarah Vaughan?” He answers as many as he can, then we dash off to the faculty cafeteria for a quick lunch before his 2 p.m. UIC Jazz Ensemble rehearsal.

Davis hasn’t eaten all day, and he’s starving.

A question begs to be asked: How does Davis manage to juggle so many activities? “I take one day at a time,” he says over a plate of grilled salmon and wild rice. “I look at the agenda and decide what the most important thing is. Some things are a regimen; I have to be in a certain place, and I have specific office hours. I’m there, and I work really hard. I end up working late a lot. Last night, I was up all night helping my 12-year-old daughter with her history fair project.”

Davis has three children: Zoe, 12; Sydney, 8; and Donovan, 2. His wife, **Lisa Parker-Davis, ’93 MD**, is a pediatrician by trade but now a stay-at-home mom—she tends to the kids while Orbert is consumed by his various projects.

One monumental project was a composition he penned last year in honor of Nelson Mandela’s 90th birthday. His Chicago Jazz Philharmonic debuted the piece in

July at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park. But for Davis, the creative process began several months earlier. He spent the first few months researching South African music for inspiration. “I actually composed the piece in May, and I had two months to finish it,” he says. “So basically, I was writing 12-hour days. I compose at home, so I was able to sleep when I needed to sleep. I’d just write all the time, then get really tired and sleep for awhile. At the same time, I’m glued to the phone because there’s so much going on at the office.”

When Davis was hired to head the College of Architecture and the Arts’ jazz program in 2005, he was given free rein to assemble his own team of instructors. He drew from his experience as a player and brought in some of the finest jazz musicians in Chicago. They perform in Davis’ groups, providing a continuum between his performing and educational worlds. Likewise, the students benefit



In honor of Nelson Mandela's 90th birthday, Davis penned an original composition, which his Chicago Jazz Philharmonic performed last July at the Pritzker Pavilion in Chicago's Millennium Park (photos: opposite page, above and center of this page). Davis and his UIC jazz ensemble class.

from interacting with renowned musicians who are playing in the real world, week after week.

"I think we have the best jazz faculty in Chicago, and even the students believe it," says Davis. "I feel strongly that UIC could be the center of jazz education. There's something about the city that being stuck in the middle of a corn field can't give you."

One faculty member is drummer Ernie Adams, who has performed all over the world with artists ranging from Dizzy Gillespie to the Moscow Symphony. Asked later about Davis' talents as a musician and instructor, Adams says that despite his own accomplishments, he's still learning from Davis.

"Orbert conducts and writes the music and leads everything himself, and it turns out great," says Adams. "He shines live at Millennium Park on a major concert; and then we'll be in a small club and he just tears the place apart. Classically and in the studio, too. He's just such an all-around musician. And he's still growing—that's what I dig about Orbert. He's still growing and learning, and becoming better and better."

### SWEET HOME CHICAGO

Few jazz artists make a living off of CD sales alone. Not even someone like Davis, whose CDs have twice reached the top 10 in national jazz radio charts. Performance is a jazz musician's bread and butter, and making a living at it usually means touring continually. But Davis never had a desire to live on the road. Nor did he yearn to live in the mecca of jazz, New York City. The reason is simple.

"I love Chicago," he says. "I was very fortunate to [find] work [here]. I started recording in the studios during college. The opportunities came, so why leave?"

Though his roots are planted firmly in Chicago, Davis began his musical journey 50 miles downstate in the town of Momence. By the time he was old enough to join the school band, he knew he wanted to play the trumpet. Davis was drawn to the instrument, he says, after hearing performances by Louis Armstrong.

"My parents couldn't afford my first instrument, so I went two or three months just playing the mouthpiece," he says. Finally, in time for the band's Christmas concert, his folks saved enough money to buy him a cornet. "I learned by just watching the other kids and buzzing the mouthpiece. When I finally got it, I was just so hungry for it."

He progressed rapidly, ignited by his own enthusiasm and aided by prescient adults. "The secret to whatever success I've had is based on mentors," he says. An early mentor was his math teacher, **Charles Danish** '61 UI, who recognized his budding talent and offered to take him to private trumpet lessons. Every Saturday while Davis was in high school, Danish would drive him all the way to Oak Park. There, he studied with Mark McDunn, a professional trombonist and brass teacher who also became a mentor. Davis didn't set out to be a jazz musician per se. His goal was to be like McDunn, a versatile technician who could play proficiently, no matter what the musical context.

Davis names Stevie Wonder as his biggest musical influence while growing up. "I think Stevie is a jazz musician born

in a different time," he explains. After Wonder released "Songs in the Key of Life," Davis obtained the sheet music and used it as a textbook to teach himself music theory. "I'd sit at a piano and just ask questions daily—like why, why, why? Why is a dominant 9th [chord] different than a major 7th? And I'd sit and figure it out."

Meanwhile, Mark Ingram—a recent high school graduate four years Davis' senior—was seeking a trumpet player for Vice-Versa, an area top-40 band in which he sang and played trombone. "Someone told me about the young trumpet player out of Momence High School," Ingram recalls. "I called and set up a meeting with him and met his folks. His dad came and checked us out, and Orbert became the trumpet player for our group." It was the beginning of a musical, business and personal relationship that Ingram and Davis still share today. "The Bible says there is a friend closer than a brother," Ingram says, "and that's who Orbert is to me."

Even at age 14, Davis was serious about his music. "Honestly, his musical ability was far greater than mine and anyone else's," says Ingram. "And he was the youngest in our group!"

The band was popular, and it brought popularity to Davis, too. When he began studying music performance at DePaul University in 1978, though, he left the group. Within a year, Ingram followed his friend to Chicago, where they formed a new R&B and funk band called Staff (later renamed Grand Staff). Scarcely a weekend went by when the band wasn't booked at a private function, so Davis was gaining professional experience even as he attended school. He also gained a

# S AN ORBERT DAVIS SAMPLER

BY JOHN JANOWIAK



## Chicago Jazz Philharmonic, Collective Creativity

3SIXTEEN RECORDS, 2008

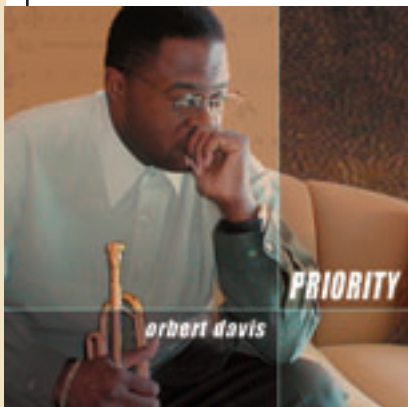
For the 2004 Chicago Jazz Festival, Orbert Davis was asked to “think big” in planning his headline performance. And think big he did—so big, in fact, that he hired an entire orchestra. And so began the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic, a 55-piece orchestral ensemble that inter-

weaves classical and jazz styles. Davis continues to lead, conduct and compose for the band—not to mention play his trumpet in it—and in 2008, he pulled it all together to make this recording. It begins with the heraldic “Fanfare for Cloud Gate,” commissioned for the 2005 dedication of the Cloud Gate sculpture at Millennium Park. Later, in the multi-faceted “Collective Creativity Suite,” jazzy trumpets, trombones and tubas cross-pollinate with violins, cellos and harp. Tying it all together is a driving jazz rhythm section and engaging jazz solos by such artists as flutist Nicole Mitchell, saxophonist Ed Wilkerson and Davis himself.

## Orbert Davis, Priority

3SIXTEEN RECORDS, 2004

Currently out of print but planned for reissue this year, this 2001 outing offers great examples of Davis soloing at the top of his game on challenging, thought-provoking jazz compositions. On the opening title track, Davis starts things off with a bang, soloing right off the bat before launching into an acrobatic horn line with Ari Brown. “Relentless” sounds as demanding as the name would imply, and “Block Party” is a melodic, life-affirming original that fades out on a frenzied sparring match between Davis and Brown. Showing off the diversity of his styles and influences, Davis includes the Miles Davis/Gil Evans composition “Miles Ahead” and a mainstream version of Bill Withers’ “Ain’t No Sunshine.” And, from way out in left field, “Weatherbird” shows that he’s a devoted student of Louis Armstrong’s music, too. Guests include vocalists Kurt Elling and Bobbi Wilsyn. UIC Instructor Ernie Adams plays drums masterfully throughout.

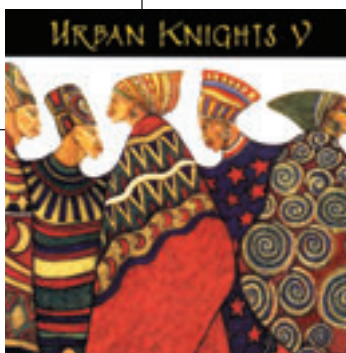


## Orbert Davis Blue Notes

3SIXTEEN RECORDS, 2004

Davis tends to show off a variety of styles and influences on his solo CDs, and he’s not above mixing in some down-and-dirty entertainment along with heavier jazz compositions. “Blue Notes,” his most recent jazz combo recording, is no exception. For the most part, it leans toward gospel-infused soul-jazz, balanced by a few pensive ballads, straight-ahead blues and a little bebop for good measure. The title track eases us in with a film-noir-ish ballad featuring singer Dee Alexander; then the combo shifts into full-on Jazz Messenger’s mode with a hard-swinging rendition of Wayne Shorter’s “Hammer Head,” followed by “Back in the Day,” a funky Davis original. Davis’ solos are

impeccable throughout, and his statement on the Latin-flavored ballad “Dear D’Lana” is particularly dynamic. As usual, he surrounds himself with a crack team of sidemen, including pianist Ryan Cohan and veteran saxophonist (and UIC Instructor) Ari Brown.



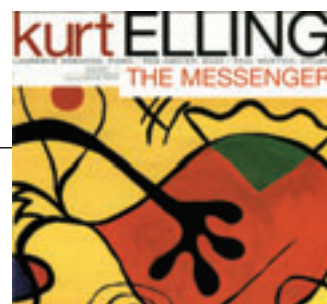
## Urban Knights Urban Knights V

NARADA, 2003

It pays to have friends in high places, and Davis has done a fair amount of recording work with legendary pianist **Ramsey Lewis**, **NAVY PIER ATTENDEE** and his son Frayne Lewis, who produced this CD. Given the fact that this disc is in the smooth-jazz genre and Davis is only one of various featured sideman, we don’t get to hear the full depth of his jazz chops here. But Davis’ performance is a testament to his prowess as a well-rounded studio professional, and on his featured track, “The New Funktier,” Davis’ funky trumpet solo lends this CD its hardest edge.

## Kurt Elling, The Messenger, BLUE NOTE, 1997

Well-known jazz vocalist Kurt Elling has appeared on Davis’ own albums and projects, including the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic. Here’s an instance where Davis returns the favor, as he makes a cameo appearance on one of Elling’s own CDs—for the renowned Blue Note label, no less. Davis’ muted trumpet adds a sly accompaniment to Elling’s enticing version of “April in Paris.”



These CDs highlight his roles as **band leader, soloist and sideman**



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foothold in the commercial jingle industry, doing sessions for radio and television commercials. That line of work not only became a cash cow for him down the road, but helped him hone his chops as a composer and arranger.

Grand Staff landed a recording contract with Warner Bros., and toured widely throughout the United States and as far as Japan. But as the 1980s wound down, so did the record deal, and Davis and Ingram decided to take a new direction. They disbanded the group, and Ingram quit his day job at Ameritech. They both directed their energy toward promoting Davis’ career as a solo jazz artist. As crazy as it sounded to their friends and families at the time, their plan worked out pretty well.

## GIVING BACK

To sum up Davis’ musical career from there would require a much longer article. Suffice it to say that his resume is 21 pages long. In the jazz realm, he’s recorded four of his own CDs, which have received significant airplay and glowing reviews. In the meantime, Davis received a master’s in music pedagogy from Northwestern University, performed a solo with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, racked up

more than 3,000 commercial jingle credits and even served as jazz consultant for the film “Road to Perdition” starring Paul Newman and Tom Hanks.

Along the way, Davis has always made education a priority. UIC appealed to him partly because it’s a public school, accessible to students of limited means. He says that every child is a potential musical genius, and it’s just a matter of exposing him or her to music at a young enough age.

A case in point: In the 1980s, Davis ran a music-appreciation program called From Bach to Bebop for the city-funded arts program Urban Gateways. While giving an assembly at Robert Emmet Elementary on Chicago’s West Side, he and his band mates played “The Entertainer” by Scott Joplin. Out in the audience, 13-year-old Reginald Robinson was electrified. “I was like a sponge at that time, and that was the right thing to come along and get my interest,” says Robinson. He immediately began learning piano and immersed himself in playing ragtime music. Years later, in 2004, Robinson’s talents as a ragtime pianist earned him a MacArthur Fellowship “Genius Award.”

Who knows how many more Reginald Robinsons are out there, ready to be

inspired by a teacher like Davis? “I want people to see that when students are involved in jazz, their world is not the same,” Davis says. “Not that they’re necessarily going to become musicians, but they’re learning skills at such a high level. Decision making, communication—every skill that corporate America needs, it’s right in the jazz ensemble.”

Speaking of the jazz ensemble, it’s time for Davis to lead his rehearsal now. Even though I’ve kept him a little late, he’s not worried. “These kids are so self-motivated. They know what to do.” We head to the rehearsal hall, and Davis warms them up on the tune “Nardis,” letting each musician perform a solo. But as the tune progresses, the solos become loud and frenetic, and Davis brings them to a halt. “This isn’t one of those swing-it and burn-it’s,” he says. “Let’s say everybody has the chops, but you don’t have to use it on this. You can reflect, but you don’t have to prove anything.”

They start back up and he improvises a quiet, ethereal trumpet solo of his own to establish the mood. Then he cuts off the rhythm section again to explain. “See, it’s like walking in the forest. You have no idea where you’re going, but you’re just enjoying the path along the way.” **UIC**