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UNT mourns loss of jazz educator Leon Breeden

DENTON (UNT), Texas — Former University of North Texas jazz studies director Leon Breeden, who led UNT's jazz program to international prominence, died Wednesday (Aug. 11). He was 88.

Breeden served as director of the UNT jazz studies program and the One O'Clock Lab Band — the university's premier jazz ensemble — from 1959 to 1981.

"The prestige that jazz enjoys today is due in large measure to the work of Leon Breeden and other educators of his generation who had to work hard to bring jazz into the university music curriculum," said John Murphy, chair of the UNT Division of Jazz Studies. "Leon Breeden's legacy at UNT includes a dedication to fostering students' creativity by making their creative work as soloists, composers and arrangers the centerpiece of our performances and recordings; a devotion to the highest standards of professionalism; an expanded jazz studies faculty and improved facilities; and a mission to pass on the gift of the art of jazz to the next generation. We benefit every day from his decades of service to jazz education."

During his tenure, Breeden led the One O'Clock Lab Band in performances across the world, including a 1967 performance at the White House, where the band shared billing with Duke Ellington and Stan Getz. He started the One O'Clock Lab Band's long-held tradition of recording an album every year. Under his direction, the band earned its first two Grammy nominations — one for *Lab '75* and another for *Lab '76* — making it the first university band in the nation to earn the prized nomination.

In addition, the band received almost 50 national awards for group performance and for individual performance while Breeden led the group. During his time at the helm, the One O'Clock Lab Band performed at the prestigious Montreux International Jazz Festival in Switzerland and toured Germany, Mexico, Portugal and the Soviet Union.

Breeden is also responsible for moving the rehearsal time of the premier jazz band from 2 p.m. to 1 p.m., giving the One O'Clock Lab Band its iconic name.

Breeden established ties with world-renowned bandleader Stan Kenton at the Notre Dame National Jazz Festival, where the band performed. Kenton later bequeathed his entire orchestra library to UNT.

Breeden — a respected clarinetist, saxophonist, arranger and composer — wrote arrangements performed by many groups, including the Boston Pops and the Cleveland and the Cincinnati orchestras.

He received an Outstanding Professor honor in 1976 from UNT. The Texas Legislature proclaimed May 3, 1981, "Leon Breeden Day."

In 1985, he was inducted into the Hall of Fame for the National Association of Jazz Educators. The North Texas Jazz Festival unveiled a Leon Breeden Award for the best middle school or high school big band in 2003.

A professor emeritus of music, Breeden was recognized as an Honorary Alumnus at UNT in 1986 and has played important roles at many of the jazz program's celebrations and milestone anniversaries.

Breeden earned a bachelor of arts in music education and master of music education from Texas Christian University. He received an honorary doctorate from TCU in 2001 and an honorary doctorate from UNT in 2009.

Funeral services will be held on Monday, Aug. 16, at 3 p.m. at Denton Bible Church, 2300 E. University Dr., Denton, TX 76209. Contributions in his honor may be made to the Leon Breeden Music Scholarship or the Leon Breeden Jazz Trumpet Scholarship in care of the UNT College of Music Division of Jazz Studies, 1155 Union Circle #305040, Denton, TX 76203-5017.

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