Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin–Madison
On the Death of Professor Emerita Joan Wildman

Joan Wildman, Professor Emerita of Jazz Studies at the Mead Witter School of Music, jazz pianist and composer, passed away April 8, 2020. She was 82 years old. Born on January 1, 1938, in Loup County near Milburn, Nebraska, Joan was the only child of Ralph D. Poland and Lydia A. (Kokes) Poland.

She grew up on a ranch in Greeley County near Spalding, Nebraska. The ranch became quite successful but was “a lot of hard work”. This legacy of hard work with successful outcomes shaped her for her entire life. Growing up isolated in a rural area allowed her to do her “own thing” and use her imagination to “try things.” She credited her early appreciation for musical performance and the blues and ragtime, from the age twelve, with the nearby Glaser family (“Tompall and the Glaser Brothers” went on to become famous as a vocal trio and form Glaser Sound Studios in Nashville).

At age sixteen she went to Mount St. Scholastica College in Kansas, began performing in clubs in Topeka, transferred to Boston’s Berklee School of Music to study jazz, and, “missing Beethoven”, transferred to McPhail School of Music in Minneapolis-St. Paul. She performed with and married Thomas J. Wildman, a trumpet and bass player, in 1958 in Minneapolis and gave birth to four sons between 1959 and 1963. She and Thomas raised the boys together, even after they divorced in 1976. She is survived by her sons Mark E., Randall J., Keith T., and Lawrence M. Wildman.

Before coming to Wisconsin in the fall of 1977, Joan received her Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Oregon (1977), and was the first of her extended family to have received a Doctorate. She had previously held teaching positions at the University of Minnesota-Morris (1961-1964), Central Michigan University (1970-1975) and at the University of Maine in Fort Kent (1975-1977).

Joan Wildman specialized in music theory, jazz improvisation, and jazz piano from 1977 through 2002. A major influence on generations of students of jazz and jazz musicians throughout the Madison area and beyond, Joan played an especially critical role in establishing the current jazz studies program at the School of Music. While she was an accomplished classically trained pianist, Joan consistently charted new territories in original compositional concepts, and was known to deftly explore all aspects of musical improvisation. She was also an early adopter of the digital synthesizer which allowed her to experiment with new and creative aural options. Joan was equally adept at creating computer-generated animations, web pages, and computer-generated drawings. Her extensive overview of jazz history and styles formed one of the first web pages in the country, a site that incorporated multi-media animations, sound and static visuals and hyperlinked text.

Joan was a proud primary founder of the Madison Music Collective, a nonprofit regional jazz organization. Joan had a knack for bringing musicians together and promoting their work. Though she performed less later in life, Joan was an active performer both nationally and in the Madison area. She led her trio for over 25 years, producing recordings such as Orphan Folk Music (1987), Under the Silver Globe (1989), and Inside Out (1992) with Hans Sturm, Bass, and Dane Richeson, Percussion. One of her more recent releases was the album Conversations, a live recording from April of 2015 with her longtime friend and frequent collaborator Joe Fonda, Bass, during a celebration of Madison Music Collective’s 30th anniversary at the Brink Lounge in Madison. Her long-standing friendship and musical affiliation with the internationally famous saxophonist, composer and jazz educator, Roscoe Mitchell, included performances on his CD’s “Four Compositions” (1987) and “Numbers” (2011).

***

Joan Wildman was a unique creative force as an educator and performer during her years on the School of Music faculty. Her teaching was enhanced by her composing and piano performance in the jazz idiom as she helped to grow the importance of jazz in the school’s curriculum. As a strong proponent of new music she always sought to take music education and performance in directions that would go beyond the comfort zone of students and faculty alike. Her annual faculty jazz extravaganza concerts involved anyone on the faculty who was even slightly interested in sticking their toe into the waters of jazz, in
addition to those who were well versed in that performance genre. She also embodied the Wisconsin Idea by being a vital member of the Madison area and Wisconsin music scene throughout her career.


When one thinks of Joan, one immediately thinks of her passionate love of music, particularly jazz piano and synthesized electronic sounds, with a focus on avant garde improvisation. She was my friend and neighbor on the fourth floor of the School of Music from when she first arrived in 1977. Joan always pursued so many varied activities including her popular jazz improvisation study groups on campus, her public performances in the area, the many successful collaborative recordings, and her own Jazz Web Page.

Lois Anderson, Professor of Ethnomusicology 1968-2008 UW-Madison

I have much respect for Joan as a musician, friend and musical partner. Always pushing the boundaries of composition, DX7 sounds, and improvisation, Joan created a unique imprint into the musical fabric of Madison and throughout Wisconsin that will last a long time. I am honored to have been a member of her trio and to have experienced her soulful love for life, music, teaching, and friendship.

Dane Richeson, Professor of Music, Director of Percussion, Lawrence University Conservatory of Music

The great nonagenarian artist-teacher François Rabbath has often said: “Each one is unique.” That may well be, but Joan Wildman was the most unique. A powerhouse of energy – a chain-smoking, fast-talking, fearlessly-improvising, brilliantly-inventive, swirling dervish of the piano. A composer of incredible depth - a mixologist of beauty, volatility, intellect, and passion. Electronic loops of a hundred or more bars collided with folk themes, stride piano, sampled voices, African percussion, romantic sonata forms, and the blues – always the blues – under her ever-watchful ear.

Hans Sturm, Hixson Lied Professor of Double Bass & Jazz Studies, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

I was a student in several of Joan’s early classes: Jazz Improvisation; History of Improvisation in Western European Music; and Contemporary Chamber Ensemble, where she introduced me to aleatoric music and the compositions of Roscoe Mitchell. Later, her expertise was invaluable as my advisor for the works of Roscoe Mitchell and other “free jazz” artists for my doctoral thesis. She was an immensely knowledgeable and passionate teacher who taught by example. Always eager to share a work-in-progress, she was also genuinely interested to hear what others were composing and playing. She would listen intently, give a thoughtful critique and finally encourage you to go write something new just as she did every day. The last time I saw her, a month before she passed, she said something she had often exclaimed throughout the many years I’ve known her: “Isn’t it fun?!” Joan was my teacher, mentor, and friend. A role model for me and so many others as an uncompromising creative artist, having the time of her life forging her own unique creative path. She has been and will always be a major inspiration.

Jane Reynolds, Jazz Pianist, Composer and Educator, Radio Programmer/Host, “Strictly Jazz Sounds” WORT-FM

What I would like to emphasize about Joan is her unrelenting focus on moving forward: always striving to improve, always trying new things (musically & otherwise), and meeting the future with a sense of optimism, adventure, and curiosity (including after her diagnosis).

Diedre Buckley, Violist, Artist/Teacher, Madison Symphony, Wisconsin Chamber Orchestra Memorial Committee

Jane Reynolds, Phd in Theory and Composition, UW-Madison
Diedre Buckley, DMA-Viola, UW-Madison