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Pianist-composer-educator Kenny Werner is the artistic director of the Performance Wellness Institute at Berklee College of Music (Photo: Jos Knaepen)

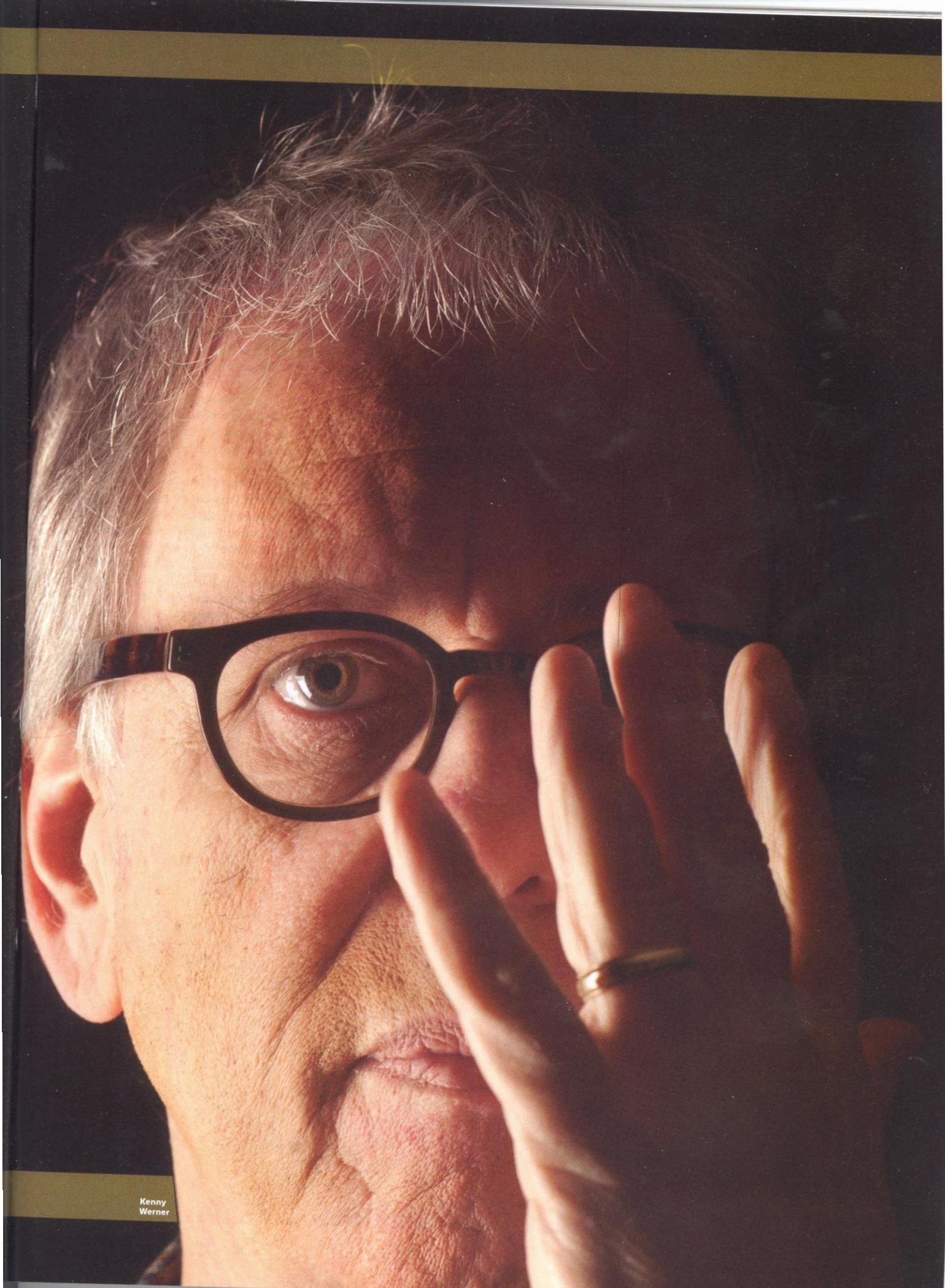
ZEN AND THE ART OF JAZZ: PART 1

Music and Spirituality

BY KENNY WERNER | PHOTO BY MICHAEL WEINTROB

First, an opening statement: There has been a silent question creeping into the consciousness of musicians, and particularly music educators. It is the question that must not be asked, something akin to “he who must not be named.” The question is: More and more young people are flocking to music schools to become professional musicians—more than at any point in history. There are more prodigies and virtu-

osos than ever before, but fewer places to play. What’s up with that? I have a new theory, perhaps one we can rally around. More and more young people will pour into music universities around the world until one day everyone on earth will look around and suddenly realize that everyone they see is a musician. At that point, we will have fulfilled the ancient prophecy of heaven on earth.



Kenny
Werner



Kenny Werner: "Surrendering to the 'Master Musician Within,' one experiences a power that never dwindles."

When I was 7 years old, I saw a friend's father play, and I was mesmerized. I ran home and told my parents to get me a piano. They rented a Wurlitzer upright with an option to buy. I sat down and plunked out a few notes. After figuring out that I could play the melodies of any tune I had heard on the radio, I went into the kitchen and announced to my mom, "Good news, I won't be needing piano lessons. I just figured out how to play!" I guess I've never really wavered from that

belief. To me, playing music is natural. It should be easy and not overly important if it makes you feel unworthy to play it. Music is for you—God's gift to mankind. God said, "Here, I give you music. Have fun, go forth and *play*." (Hint, music is the only art form with the verb *to play* suggesting it might be only a game).

An enlightened being realizes that every impulse, every fiber of his being, every blade of grass, everything on this earth, including his mis-

takes, are nothing less than a gift from God. God being defined as whatever or whoever one thinks is the Giver of all this. Even if one thinks of all of it as one big accident, he may rejoice at the great boon of such an accident. There's always a reason to rejoice. I certainly have not fully attained this state of mind in my life, but it's pretty much the way I feel when I'm playing music. I always have, but at a few critical times in my development I could have lost this easy wisdom while pursuing my music education. The trick was to become a trained musician without having my dreams trampled on. At those points I met two very important teachers.

The first was Madame Chaloff in Boston, whom I met while attending the Berklee School of Music in 1970. She spoke of the "secret of playing piano," and said that the arms should "defy gravity."

This was my first introduction to effortless-ness. Until then, I had grunted and groaned and made all sorts of weird faces. I later recognized this as tension and nothing more. Madame Chaloff was a real stickler for the perfect drop of the finger. I spent months learning to play one note. I think that once or twice I got it right, and we actually went on to the second finger!

She was such an important influence on my development that I acknowledged her in my book *Effortless Mastery* (Aebersold Jazz), noting: "Madame Chaloff was very one-pointed in her focus. Music was about playing for God. I was grateful for that message. ... She made the connection for me between spirit and music. Through



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her, I was able to merge the two.”

After attending Berklee, I got the opportunity to go to Rio de Janeiro. João Assis Brasil was a concert pianist who was the twin brother of the late saxophonist Victor Assis Brasil, with whom I traveled to Rio to play concerts. I lived there about four months and stayed with Victor’s family, which pretty much allowed me to study with João on a daily basis.

He had taught me valuable lessons about just dropping the fingers and “being kind to myself.” He had achieved success at being a very high-level concert pianist through intense pressure and practice, but it had taken its toll. He had adapted through various methods of self-discovery a new strategy to live and work by. There were two main components. One was a five-finger exercise of just releasing the fingers effortlessly onto the white keys of the piano.

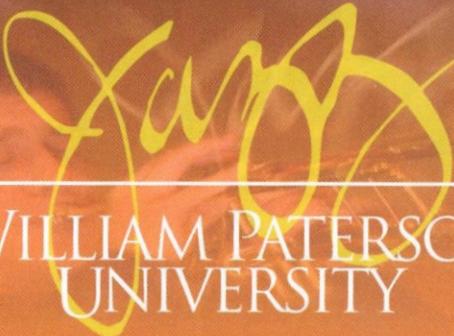
As I wrote in *Effortless Mastery*, “This was similar to Madame Chaloff’s one-finger exercise, but not as elusive. This exercise only needed to be done for five minutes—a short amount of time to focus without pressure. Concentrating in this manner, five minutes became ten, ten became twenty, and so on, until one could practice effortlessly for as long as one wanted. At the time I met him, João had been working this philosophy for about two years, and his personality was rather luminous. ... Using the five-minute concept, he had built up his practice time to eight to ten hours a day. But now it was pressure-free, and he felt a great deal of love and joy while doing it. As I watched him play, I felt like some kind of inferior species—he made it all look so easy!”

The second component was learning to be “kind to himself.” This may sound ridiculously simple, but for me it was a revelation. When the pressure built in me to do better or to play better, or my ego tormented me with my reaction to the success of others, I could practice just being kind to myself.

In *Effortless Mastery*, I described a revelatory moment we shared: “One day we were listening to Horowitz playing—I don’t remember which piece, but João was joyously listening while I was biting my fingernails. I was thinking so much, I could barely hear the music. Thoughts like ‘Oh, that playing is so great ... it’s really painful to hear it! ... This means that I am nothing ... unless ... if I practice eight hours a day for the next twenty years ...’ raced through my mind. My mind often behaved like that. In fact, it behaved that way all the time. Just at that moment, João put his hand on my shoulder, and I jumped. He startled me. When I turned around, he was smiling. He must have been reading my mind, or at least my body language, because he said, ‘Be kind to yourself!’ This statement, uttered at that moment, was revelatory. It showed me the folly of my thoughts. At that moment, I was able to let go, and suddenly I heard the music. Horowitz was playing so exquisitely! I felt reborn.”

João told me to practice the five-finger exercise and nothing else for two weeks. I freaked out. I thought I would perish, but I trusted him, so I tried it. Long story short, after six days I escaped and played duo with Victor at a friend’s party. What happened is best quoted from my book: “When we arrived at the party, people asked us to play. I apologized for what was about to happen. I explained that Victor’s crazy brother had me touching the piano for only five minutes a day. I was out of shape and had no idea what would come out. What followed was something I will never forget. We played ‘Autumn Leaves.’ I put my hands on the piano and they played! I mean that they actually played by themselves while I watched. And what they played was blowing my mind and everybody else’s. Not only was it good, but it was so much better than I usually played. The change was astounding. In just six days of meditating, more or less, at the piano, I was totally different. My touch, usually hard and strained, sounded balanced and beautiful, like Bill Evans. I had discovered the secret of his sound. Also, at this stage of my development, I usually needed about thirteen notes to find eight good ones. There was no great rhythm or symmetry to my lines. But this night, I was playing perfect, symmetrical lines in beautiful swinging time.”

This experience was so dramatic, so clear, that this became my philosophy for life. I returned home and quietly practiced this relaxed, self-affirming way at the piano. Over the next 10 years I played from that “space” more and more. I learned to practice difficult things from that space, and before long people were asking me how I was playing from such a free space. Answering the question gradually turned into teaching. Teaching evolved into lecturing, and after a while I was more known for what I was saying than what I was playing. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that, and truthfully, I’m still not sure. But God has gifted me with a dual talent, being able to play this music on a



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fairly high level but also being able to explain how others might attain it. This comes from developing not just a high level of freedom, but of discipline, to play from a space of complete freedom and to practice from a state of complete focus. This is the essence of "Effortless Mastery."

In the '70s and '80s, I followed the holistic movement of people adapting various spiritual, psychological or physical disciplines to transform their lives from mundane to profound. I needed quite a bit of reprogramming myself. The promise of drugs had decayed into simple dependency, but the "buzz" and expanded awareness of drugs was attainable through other means. Drugs opened a window that closed after the drug wore off, leaving the seeker hungrier than ever for ... what? Consciousness? Awareness? Living in that awareness takes practice and repetition, just like playing music. I thought if humans could uplift their lives, why not musicians? What evolved for me was a career as a musician, teacher and also as an author. It has taken many years to embrace the last two. I have resolved to do that now.

Channeling the flow of music is one of the great possibilities we humans have. In order to allow music to stream through, one must have the inner balance to stay out of the way.

Music history is rich with stories of musicians who were consumed by the fire of the senses, who were so close to the fire of creativity, to the creator, that they couldn't handle the light and heat. The only time the mind or body would behave is when functioning as a pure channel to and from the music of the spheres, the music of the Self, or, if you like, the music of God.

To say "music and spirituality" is actually redundant. Music *is* spirituality. There is no one who plays who does not desire union with his beloved. The world is made up of those who know it and those who don't, and those who seek it in other forms. It can be realized through religion, a wisp of a thought or on the wings of intuition. God takes all comers. He can be as nasty as you make him, or as pure a light as can be conceived of. Surrendering to the "Master Musician Within," as I describe in *Effortless Mastery*, one experiences a power that never dwindles. It takes effort and training to find the currents of consciousness and exercises to attain and maintain that awareness. Once there, the currents will do the rest. When one draws his strength or his ideas from the creative source of all, in his mind or in actual fact (doesn't matter which), his spirit soars on the wings of song and whatever he creates moves from the mundane to the profound, from playing while sneaking peeks at his watch to "Where did the time go?" ("I closed my eyes and when I opened them the concert was over and for some reason people were staring at me and applauding furiously.") Oh yeah, it can happen. But one must learn to connect with this great power, this great wisdom that takes so many shapes. Whatever crazy version of this force you secretly entertain is also the truth, and you should go with it.

Music has no morality in and of itself. It is a higher language than that. For example, in society, to some people, sensuality and spirituality are at odds with each other. In music they are just layers. Sensuality is simply, "Hmmm, this feels real-

ly good,” and spirituality is, “Thank you (to the Giver) for this feeling.” Surrendering to the flow is sensual and spiritual. Evil in our society features cruel or gruesome acts that most of us cannot abide, but in music, evil is simply another color, and one that turns many of us on. It makes me wonder if we couldn’t resolve all the issues that separate us by moving to a higher language—*music*.

Practice in being a spiritual channel is balanced by practicing precision and technique, not for its own sake but specifically to handle the information that arrives from the Master Musician. What if he wants to speak in 5/4 time? Would you let him stumble over your lack of facility? One acquires all the technique possible as an act of worship. Virtuosity serves at the feet of consciousness. *This is the highest music.*

One of the games of life is learning increasingly complex forms and then experiencing liberation again and again by mastering those forms. That is the principle behind martial arts, video games and many other pursuits. The whole idea is to negotiate the complexities of form while completely surrendering yourself to The Source. The infinite, *the unstuck sound.*

Can you play in 13/4 and feel as primal as if you were a caveman banging a bone on a rock and yelling at the moon? Not all musicians express their spirituality the same way. Some express it through the faithful rendering of a style of music. Some express it quite formally and joyfully

through their religion. And for some, the spiritual path is the search itself.

Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Duke Ellington—they were all aware of the tradition but were even more tuned in to that “still, small voice within,” the god of their creativity, leading them to notes that they yearned for, not necessarily the notes they should play.

Religion has a history of toggling from the mystical to the dogmatic, back and forth. Jazz has moves through those same cycles: freedom, then the re-imposing of form, then the inevitable desire for freedom, and so forth. Jazz always liberates itself sooner or later from being too free or too stuck in convention by individuals who are led by inspiration, intuition, passion or, if need be, addiction.

Be a channel for your personal god of music. If he is pious, you play that. If he is sex-crazed, you play that. The tradition is certainly rich with musicians serving that yearning. The important thing is to train yourself to be able to handle whatever the Master Musician wants to play. Then you have to get out of the way and let him express himself. Ride the music on the wings of true inspiration. Build a highway to that music through your training.

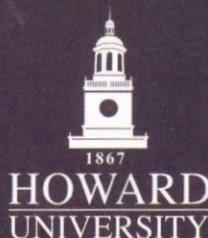
To doubt yourself, that is ego. Ego has an interesting role in this play, thwarting natural flow and supplanting greatness wherever it can find a foothold. It is a character in all the great novels and movies, as is the concept of wandering in the

dark for lack of recognition of one’s true identity until one finds out in some manner that he is a great being. Ego is the wicked witch, the snake offering an apple, the Devil in *Damn Yankees*.

In the next installment of “Zen and the Art of Jazz,” we shall look at how many ways ego conspires to thwart the flow, inhibit the breath and fill us with fear that limits our vision of ourselves. Ego withholds our greatness, hides from us the fact that wisdom lies within. We needn’t invest all our faith in authority figures, whether they be religious or cultural. The great thing about music is that all the power and wisdom lies within our own being.

Imagine observing your body playing music while you peer out from the ecstasy of your being and every sound you hear “is the most beautiful sound you’ve ever heard.” That is the musician’s equivalent of enlightenment. What would that sound like? What would that feel like? It is the promise of being a musician, a channel, one of the great benefits of being human. DB

Kenny Werner is a world-class pianist, composer, educator and author whose prolific output continues to impact audiences and musicians around the world. His groundbreaking 1996 publication *Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within* is a guide to distill the emotional, spiritual and psychological aspects of an artist’s life. One of the most widely read books on music and improvisation, it is required reading at many universities and conservatories. Werner was recently named Artistic Director of The Performance Wellness Institute at Berklee College of Music. His new CD *Coalition (Half Note)* features Miguel Zenón, Lionel Loueke, Benjamin Koppel and Ferenc Nemeth. Visit Werner online at kennywerner.com.



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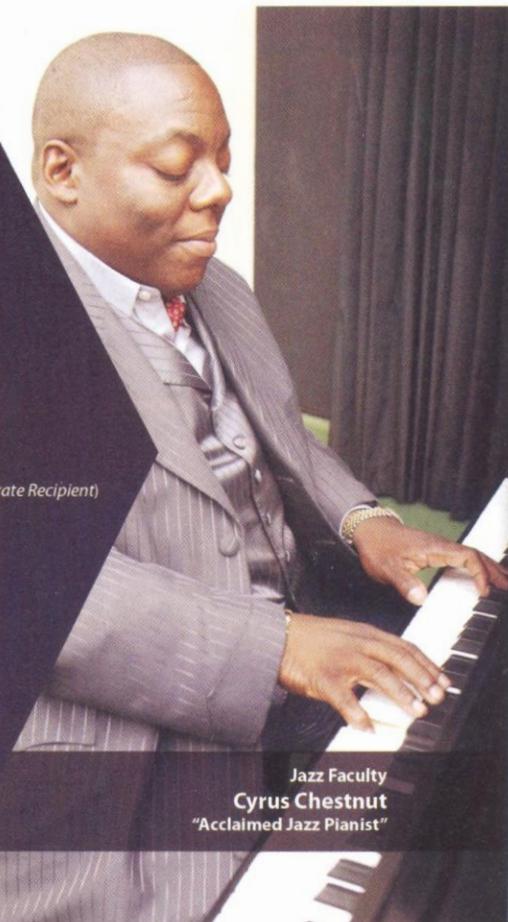
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