

# Jazz Guardian Award

The Jazz Guardian Award is presented annually by Detroit Jazz Fest in recognition of an individual with Michigan ties who, through advocacy, teaching, philanthropy and/or musical achievement, has made an extraordinary contribution to the elevation and perpetuation of jazz.

## Lars Bjorn and James Gallert

### *Education and Advocacy*

Lars Bjorn and James “Jim” Gallert began their collaboration in 1986. When they met, it was obvious they shared a common goal: harvesting information about Detroit jazz musicians. Bjorn always had the vision of writing a definitive history of Detroit jazz, and Gallert knew the importance of preserving the voice of the artists. They were able to combine their knowledge and resources to create a portrait of the Detroit jazz scene, culminating in the 2001 publication of *Before Motown—A History Of Detroit Jazz, 1920–1960*.

Over the years, this joyful collaboration has produced numerous presentations and articles, including many for the Detroit Jazz Fest. Since 2000, the two have also produced and managed DJF’s highly popular Jazz Talk Tent, which grew out of Gallert’s “Meet the Artist” program begun in the 1990s.

In addition to their successful partnership, both Bjorn and Gallert have made significant individual marks on the Detroit jazz scene. Bjorn’s contributions include his service on the board of directors at the Detroit Jazz Center, his interviews with Detroit musicians, his pioneering article surveying early Detroit jazz (published in the *Detroit Jazz Who’s Who*) and his meticulously organized information culled from old newspapers. He currently serves as president of the Southeast Michigan Jazz Association (SEMJA), a volunteer organization that provides jazz education and supports live performances of jazz in southeastern Michigan.

Gallert’s resume includes decades as producer and host of *Jazz Yesterday* and *Detroit Jazz Alive*, interviews with many Detroit musicians and his detailed biographies of forgotten musicians like pianist Todd Rhodes. He has also collected a large number of photographs and rare recordings related to the jazz scene—clubs, musicians and bands. Gallert’s involvement with the Detroit Jazz Fest goes back to the first edition and has continued unabated. He has served in several capacities: emcee, writer, historian and artist selection committee member.

Together, Bjorn and Gallert continue their crusade for jazz, constantly unearthing new and fascinating information and sharing it with all who will listen. True guardians of jazz, they have committed their lives to Detroit and the festival, “body and soul.”



## Johnny O'Neal

### *Artistry*

Throughout his career, jazz pianist Johnny O’Neal has sought to keep the flame of mentors Ray Brown, Hank Jones and Art Blakey burning bright. “I just want to play and preserve the style of the jazz masters.”

Largely self-taught, O’Neal’s playing evokes the influences of his idols, Oscar Peterson and Art Tatum, but reshaped into his own swinging and melodic approach. As DJF Artist in Residence Mulgrew Miller recently explained, “There are so many outstanding things about Johnny’s playing . . . [he] has a million dollar touch. Very few people touch the piano like that to get that kind of sound and feeling . . . The other thing is his feeling of swing, which is so natural. Then there’s Johnny’s personality, so engaging. And Johnny can play a ballad like few people, if any. I’ve always held his talent in the highest regard, and I think he’s a very special artist.”

A native of Detroit, O’Neal began exploring jazz in 1976 and caught the attention of legendary bassist Ray Brown. The relationship led to the release of O’Neal’s 1983 debut album, *Coming Out*, as well as stints playing alongside jazz greats Milt Jackson, Art Blakey, Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan, Nancy Wilson, Kenny Burrell and Benny Golson, to name a few. O’Neal lists three major milestones in his life as a musician: opening as solo pianist for Oscar Peterson at Carnegie Hall early in his career, his induction into the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame in 1997, and portraying his mentor, Art Tatum, in the 2004 award-winning bio-pic *Ray*.

## Ben Pruitt

### Education

Benjamin L. Pruitt Sr. has served as a supervisor and director in the Office of Fine Arts for the Detroit Public Schools since 1999, and has distinguished himself as a music educator and musician since beginning his professional career in Arkansas in 1961. His teaching and performing experiences are extensive.

Pruitt is a graduate of Arkansas Agricultural, Mechanical and Normal (AM&N) College (presently the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff) and Wayne State University in Detroit, Mich. He began his career as a professional educator in Magnolia, Ark., where he conducted award-winning bands for five years at Walker and Columbia High Schools. Since relocating to Detroit in 1966, he has directed the Detroit Public Schools' instrumental music ensembles at Wilson Junior High School (1966–1972), Henry Ford High School (1972–1987) and Cass Technical High School (1987–1999). Pruitt also served as acting head of the Fine Arts Department at Henry Ford High School, head of the Fine Arts Department at Cass Technical High School, and director of the music program at the Cranbrook Horizons Upward Bound in Bloomfield Hills, Mich.

The various symphonic, marching and jazz ensembles under Pruitt's direction have consistently been recognized for excellence, locally and nationally. The Ford and Cass Tech Concert and Symphonic Bands received excellent and superior ratings at local, state and national festivals from 1973–1999. The Cass Tech Jazz Ensemble, CassJazz, appeared regularly at the Detroit International Jazz Festival and the Michigan Tastefest and was invited to perform at the Midwestern Music Conference in Ann Arbor, Mich., in 1998. CassJazz was also selected by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra Department of Education to perform for international jazz artists Frank Foster, Benny Golson, Marcus Roberts and Nancy Wilson at Detroit's Orchestra Hall.

An accomplished musician in his own right, Pruitt has toured nationally with the Joe Simon Rhythm and Blues Band led by internationally acclaimed jazz artist Charlie Gabriel. He is presently leader of his own 18-piece jazz orchestra, Ben's Friends, which performs regularly in the metro Detroit area. The band has also performed at the Detroit Jazz Fest and the Birmingham (Mich.) Jazz Festival.

The Michigan School Band and Orchestra Association, District XV, elected Pruitt "Teacher of the Year" in 1977, 1996 and 1999. He was also recognized by the *Detroit Free Press* as the Detroit Public Schools' "Mr. Holland"—a reference to the Hollywood movie production of *Mr. Holland's Opus*. Several of Pruitt's students have become successful professional musicians and music educators, as well as professionals in numerous other occupations.

Pruitt served as Minister of Music at Plymouth United Church of Christ (1989–2002) and has served as minister of music at Body of Christ Community of Faith since 2004. He served as director of the Detroit Police Department Community Concert Band and the Charles Young American Legion Post Concert and Marching Bands.

Pruitt was also one of the organizers and the lead director of the Detroit Public Schools All-City High School Marching Band that appeared in the Tournament of Roses Parade, Bandfest and the CBS production of *Coming Up Roses* in southern California in 2001–2002.

