

Marian McPartland: All that glitters might be jazz

By JUDITH PRATT
Special to The Journal

MARIAN McPartland's award-winning "Piano Jazz" program has been bringing the greats of jazz to over 150 radio stations for 15 years or more. She reaches Ithaca on WSKG radio every Friday evening after the news.

McPartland will bring her own inimitable brand of piano jazz to Ithaca College this Saturday as part of the Ithaca College Concert Series.

This isn't the first trip to Ithaca for this internationally acclaimed musician. Not only has she played here before, but in 1981 she received an honorary Doctor of Music degree from Ithaca College.

"We're very proud that she's a member of our community," says Steve Brown, who heads the Jazz Studies program at Ithaca College's School of Music. Brown originally suggested that McPartland receive an honorary degree.

A mutual friend introduced Brown and McPartland many years ago, says Brown. "We have become fast friends since that time."

In a phone interview from her Fort Washington home, McPartland speaks of Brown with equal admiration. "He's always had a high level of students," she says. "I'm going to listen to his band

the night before I play, and I know I'm going to hear a good group."

Along with performing everywhere from funky jazz clubs to classy concert stages all over the world, McPartland conducts many seminars and workshops, helping to inspire and motivate young people in jazz. And she has plenty to teach.

"She has a very inventive and imaginative harmonic sense," says Brown. "She's got a great tradition behind her."

McPartland began learning that tradition in her native England. She started out studying classical music at the Guildhall School of Music in London, but left to tour vaudeville theaters in a four-piano act, sharing the bill with singers, jugglers and comedians.

"My parents were shocked," says McPartland.

During World War II, McPartland joined ENSA, the English equivalent of the USO. In Belgium, she met and played with the renowned cornetist Jimmy McPartland. They were married in Germany.

"Jimmy McPartland was a cornet player in the swing era, Dixieland style of Chicago," explains Brown. In Chicago, McPartland first played in Jimmy's trio, then formed her own Marian McPartland Trio in 1950. They played at the Hickory House until the



Photo by R.J. CAPAK

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Marian McPartland Trio

- **WHAT:** Jazz pianist.
- **WHERE:** Ford Hall, Ithaca College
- **WHEN:** Sat., Mar 21, 8:15 p.m., pre-concert lecture by Steve Brown, 7:30 p.m.
- **TICKETS:** \$10 general admission, \$9 IC faculty, staff, friends, other students at DeWitt Mall Ticket Center, Rehop Records, & Dillingham Center at IC.
- **INFORMATION:** 274-3171.

had so many musicians on the show, and no end in sight."

Sometimes it takes a while to persuade someone to play. "In David Brubeck's case he just said, 'I'm not going to play with you, I'd be too nervous.'" McPartland suggested he bring his bass player son Chris, but as it turned out, "Chris and the bass just stayed in the control room, because Dave had a ball."

It's clear from listening to "Piano Jazz" that McPartland loves to play, and to play with many different musicians. In Ithaca, she will be backed up by two Rochester musicians, drummer Rich Thompson and bass player Bob Stara. Both graduated from the Eastman School of Music and "are some of the best players in Rochester," says Steve Brown.

"I've developed rhythm sections all over the place because it's getting so difficult to travel, to take a bass on an airplane," says McPartland. "I have worked with these guys a lot."

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Was being English and a woman a hindrance to her career?

"You're putting it very nicely," laughs McPartland. But, she says, "I think I've always been one of the lucky ones. At that time I didn't think of such a thing. I was lucky to have married Jimmy. He paved the way. I worked with his group and he finally pushed me into my own group, so I didn't have to stand around and wait to be hired."

"All of us women musicians had our own women's lib — we were out there doing it. Of course, I might have felt differently if I had been alone and trying to get work."

Since then, McPartland appeared at many of the country's most prestigious clubs, been a regular guest at the major jazz festivals and appeared with symphony orchestras. She began her recording career with Capital and Savoy, then started her own record company, Halcyon. Her most recent recordings are with Concord, for whom she just put out a new CD, "Live at Maybeck Hall."

And she's been spreading the

jazz word every week on "Piano Jazz." If you can't go study jazz at Ithaca College, just listen to McPartland on the radio. Her guest list covers jazz from A to Z and beyond. Names range from Dizzy Gillespie to Judy Collins, Eubie Blake to Claude Bolling, Hank Jones to Peter Schickele.

The program started when "they wanted to have some kind of musical show on the South Carolina educational radio," remembers McPartland. "They had just done a very successful series with Alec Wilder and he recommended me."

She suggested the format: McPartland, the guest, two pianos, some talk and a lot of music. "I thought it would be easy and not too expensive," she says. "We've

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"I love to play with different people. The variety keeps me going."

She also looks forward to renewing old friendships in Ithaca. "It's a social scene wherever I go," she laughs. "I think I could drop down by parachute anywhere and find friends. It's the music — it's universal, and it's a force for good." □