



## The Legendary Blue Lake Monster: an Extraordinary Band

The Monster is the mid-1980s, including Tim Froncek (with cymbal), Richard Goldsworthy (below Froncek), Dr. George West (front row, 3rd from left), and Tom Stansell (front row, far right)

Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp's jazz program has a history nearly as long as the camp itself. During the 2009 season, the program, under the direction of talented percussionist and jazz educator Tim Froncek, continued to thrive. There were three student bands each session, each directed by expert educators who are also top-notch performers. The camp also presented its 27<sup>th</sup> Annual Jazz Festival, with performances by Blue Lake's faculty and staff ensembles, as well as the Homecoming Concert of the International Jazz Ensemble. In May, the Faculty Jazz Quintet gave several concerts in France as a part of the International Exchange Program.

In the very first season of 1966, Founder and President Fritz Stansell directed a jazz big band, with students predominantly recruited from jazz programs he had started in schools in the Muskegon area. As Mr. Stansell relates in his book, *Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp: the Early Years*, that first band was, for the most part, focused and attentive while rehearsing and performing, but full of behavior problems elsewhere on camp. Jazz was not a part of the curriculum again until 1971, when Dr. George West became the program's director. Since that time, jazz has been a fixture at Blue Lake and many of the program's alumni have gone on to notable careers in jazz performance and education.

From 1983 to 2004, the most visible symbol of the strength of the jazz program was the legendary Blue Lake Monster, a big band of jazz faculty and staff that performed annually at camp and in locations around West Michigan. Tim Froncek says that, despite the fact that the band was reconstituted each season, many of the core players remained in the group from one year to the next and the group's quality was always high.



### Then there was that "other" Monster. . . .

The story of the genesis of the name "Blue Lake Monster" has several variations. Camp Hardy, which was a previous camp on the site, had the legend of "Swamp Man." This figure was reputed to rise out of the marshes on the east side of Little Blue Lake and scare everyone at camp. However, everyone at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp, especially those involved with the big band, hearken back to the legend of the "monster" in Little Blue Lake.

Tom Stansell, a regular in the sax section of the Monster for many years, has perhaps the definitive story of how the legend came about.

While the 1,200 acres of the Manistee National Forest occupied by Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp today remains an area of great beauty, in the early years of the camp, the woods, swamp areas, and the lake itself were much wilder. Tom Stansell relates that the lake had plentiful panfish, bluegill, and perch. The lake was also full of weeds, especially in the shallower areas, and Tom and his brother, Terry, were often called upon to cut them with the use of

Tom Stansell, son of founders Fritz and Gretchen Stansell and a regular member of the Monster for many years, recalls that “the guys [in the Monster] came from all over and brought all their different jazz experiences. There would be one guy from New York and another from Cincinnati and local players. Getting them all to find common ground was a challenge, but with a few rehearsals, the band would be playing well together and we’d be ready for the season.”

But, how did the name “Monster” come about? Each person you ask has a different version of the story. Fritz Stansell believes that it is a combination of a nod to the legend of the “monster” in Little Blue Lake (the camp’s version of the Loch Ness monster—see sidebar) and the “Little Monsters” of the first season’s jazz band. Tim Froncek also mentions the lake monster, but adds, “Every one of those players was a ‘monster,’ one of the best players around on their instrument.”

However the name came about, during its tenure, the group was the crown jewel of Blue Lake’s jazz program. According to Fritz Stansell and Dr. George West, affectionately known as “Doc” by all his students, the origins of the Monster went back to an earlier pick-up jazz band at camp, known as the “Blue Fakers.”

“The ‘Blue Fakers’ began as an impromptu ‘kicks’ band made up of interested faculty and counselors, including Fritz [Stansell] on bass,” says Dr. West. “As I recall, faculty member Frank Sacci [a faculty member in 1970s and 1980s] was the ‘instigator’ and I played trombone in the band.”

Fritz Stansell adds, “The faculty members got together for maybe one read-through and then gave a concert for the camp. It was unpolished, but everyone enjoyed themselves.”

“I really enjoyed watching the ‘Blue Fakers,’” says Tom Stansell. “It was an interesting collection of the players who just happened to be around. Everyone had a great time playing jazz together.”

“It’s not to be underestimated how those adult musicians were role models for the kids,” Tom continues. “Those people were all professional musicians, but they were playing for fun. It planted the subliminal seed that music can be important for your whole life. When young players watch older ones that closely, it has a great effect. The kids’ growth can almost be measured from day to day.”

The effort to form a permanent jazz big band was aided by the need for musicians to back up featured artists on “Highlights” concerts. “Highlights” was a celebrity concert series that brought many famous performers to camp for over a decade in the 1970s and 1980s. This big band also gave concerts as a “stand alone” ensemble.

a weed trimmer operated while sitting or standing in a small boat.

“The weed cutter would stir up all kinds of stuff in the lake,” Tom says. “Once we were out working and all of a sudden a huge snapping turtle broke the surface. You often hear people talk about ‘fish stories,’ but we were in an eight-foot pram with a four-foot beam [width], and this turtle was easily as big in diameter as the beam.”

When he and his brother related the story back at camp, they were met with some understandable skepticism.

“Since we were teenagers at the time, people thought we were just telling the story to scare the campers, but Terry and I both saw that turtle. With all the moss it had growing on its shell, it had to have been living in the lake for ages.”

The first year that the big band gave concerts as the Monster coincided with Blue Lake's first annual Jazz Festival in 1983. The Festival, which for many years took place on the final Saturday of Session 3, was a one-day event that featured the Monster, as well as a number of other Blue Lake and professional jazz groups. The different ensembles played throughout the afternoon and evening.

"It was kind of a jazz flea market," remembers Tim Froncek. "There were T-shirts, recordings, and a lot of people who were really into jazz."

During that first Jazz Festival, the Monster performed with the Bob Rosengarden Trio and saxophonist Eric Kloss. The impressive lineup for the rest of the festival included Blue Lake student and International jazz bands, the Bob Hull Big Band, the Muscat Ramblers, the Bunky Green Quartet, the Janet Lawson Quintet, the Marcus Belgrave Sextet, and the Buddy Rich Big Band.

The first year also saw the camp offering six student jazz ensembles during Session 3 (Red, White, Blue, Gold, and Green bands, as well as a Jazz Choir), primarily so that the faculty and staff associated with them could serve as members of the Monster. For many years, Session 3 proved to be one dominated by jazz, with the one-day festival and ensemble rehearsals taking place in the Grease Pit, the Jazz Bowl, Birdland (which was not yet a fully enclosed building), and even in Freeman Memorial Chapel.

During the Festival, the Monster would also play concerts out in the community, usually in area restaurants. Salvatore's on the Lake in Muskegon and Whitehall's White Sands Inn were frequent venues for the band.

In any particular year, once the Monster got going, it rarely stopped for a breather until their last gig was over. For example, in 1984, the band, with special guest Marcus Belgrave, had a featured spot during the Jazz Festival, held that year on August 4. In addition, they played five concerts at camp in the weeks before the festival, one after, and appeared at the White Sands Inn on two different occasions. As a bonus, the Monster played a benefit concert for Blue Lake Public Radio (then just two years old) at the Boiler Room in Grand Rapids.

For many who are familiar with the history of the Monster, the 1985 edition was "the" band. The group anchored the third annual festival and toured Europe. The leader of the band that year was trombonist Richard Goldsworthy, now Blue Lake's Director of Antiquities.

"That band was really tight," says Goldsworthy, who played in the band from the "Highlights" years through the final season. "I've played in many bands, but that was the best band I played with in my entire life."

The band featured Jon Montgomery, Mike Grace, Kelly Bucheger, and Tom Stansell in the reed section; John Bailey, Bob Jensen, James Olcott, Fred Noren (later the director of the Stockholm Jazz Orchestra), and Rob Smith on trumpet; Goldsworthy, Dave Jensen, Mark Hamilton, Fritz Stansell, and Doug Blackwell on trombone; and a rhythm section of pianist Bruce Torff, guitarist Edmund Smith, bassist Dave Spring, and drummer Tim Froncek.

The group also included then sixteen year-old tenor saxophone phenom James Carter,

one of Blue Lake's most distinguished alumni. Carter, who had already toured Europe that summer as a member of the student International jazz band, was called in as a late replacement for another player and provided electrifying performances at camp and on the tour, which included stops in Denmark and Northern Germany. Fellow tenor saxophonist Kelly Bucheger has provided a wonderful vignette of both James Carter and the 1985 Monster in his article "James Carter Ruined My Life," which can be found at:

<http://www-cs.canisius.edu/~buchegeger/JamesCarterRuinedMyLife.html>

Another highlight of the 1985 Monster was the participation of trumpeter Marcus Belgrave, who had first performed with the band in 1984, and Detroit-based pianist Harold McKinney.

"Doc" West relates that Belgrave's participation that year warranted something special.

"In anticipation of the fact that Belgrave would be featured on the tour, I wrote 'Marcus Meets the Monster' to showcase him."

West wrote a number of additional pieces specifically for the Monster, including two for trombonist Bill Watrous who played with the band on several occasions.

Over the years, the Monster hosted numerous big-name jazz artists in their spot as the centerpiece of the annual jazz festival. The list of some of their guests reads like a who's-who in jazz performance and education: pianist Clare Fisher; drummers Butch Miles and Mel Lewis; vocalist Margaret Whiting; trombonists David Steinmeyer, Watrous, Harry Watters, and John Fedchock; saxophonists Gary Foster and Chris Vadala; and trumpeters Belgrave, Marvin Stamm, Bobby Shew, and Louis Smith.

"A real highlight for me," says Froncek, "was when Terry Gibbs played with us one of the last years." Gibbs was a vibraphonist who appeared with the Monster in 2002. Gibbs had played with Benny Goodman, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, and Woody Herman, as well as fronting bands for the television shows of Mel Tormé and Regis Philbin.

Dr. George West feels that getting to know the great guest artists better as musicians and individuals was an important part of his Monster experience. In addition, the members of the Monster became both the core of Blue Lake's peerless jazz faculty and personal friends.

"Along with Tim Froncek, who I am happy to say has maintained the quality of the jazz area at Blue Lake, some of my most memorable [Monster] colleagues were tenor saxophonist James Carter, trumpeter John Bailey, and the many university performer/professors, such as pianist Phil DeGreg, saxophonist Gunnar Mossblad, pianist-trombonist Bruce Early, and trumpeters John Cooper and Jim Olcott, to name just a few," says Dr. West.

For Richard Goldsworthy, no single guest artist really stands out, as he feels the entire experience was remarkable.

"I think I played every gig the Monster ever did, but it's hard to pull a plum out of the

plum pudding,” he says. “The guys were really proud of the band and wanted it to sound good, no matter who was playing with us.”

By 2004, the Monster had provided great enjoyment to both the band members and its audience for 22 seasons. However, that was its final year, although not because Blue Lake or the players did not want it to continue. It was more a recognition of the fact it had become unwieldy to have as many as six student jazz bands at one session to provide faculty and staff ensemble members for the Monster’s roster.

Jazz at Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp today is alive and well. Although the Monster is no longer active, each summer the camp is full of the sounds of jazz, made by both students and faculty. Along with the all the student, faculty, and staff jazz activity, the camp also hosts visits from groups such as the Jazz Ambassadors of the U.S. Army Field Band. In addition, Blue Lake Public Radio has one of the finest jazz announcers anywhere in Lazaro Vega.

Memories of the Monster are still strong. Tom Stansell—who played baritone, tenor, and lead alto saxophone during his tenure in both the “Highlights” bands and the Monster—is one of the many who hopes for its eventual return.

“Big band music is really important to the history of jazz, but it’s not really that common anymore. The Monster was one of the things that really put a stamp of personality on the Blue Lake experience,” he says.

Tim Froncek captures the essence of what performing with the group meant to the players.

“It was a highlight of the season. It was always amazing having that many great players together playing great charts. If you were in the band, you often get asked, ‘When are you getting back together?’”

Stay tuned. The Monster will return!