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It's the Reed Thing

By: Susan Van Dongen , TimeOFF

The New Jersey Saxophone Quartet premieres Mark Zuckerman's homage to Rooseveltians.

Geographically speaking, New Jersey may not take long to cross, but if you're stopping to enjoy all the talented musical organizations across the state, the journey could last for months, even years.

Mark Zuckerman, a composer based in Roosevelt, took advantage of his 2004 New Jersey State Council on the Arts fellowship to explore the wealth of ensembles across the Garden State, connecting with musicians, composers, patrons and other artists interested in his compositions.

"My wife and I spent last winter and spring attending approximately 20 events, crisscrossing the state from Mendham to Milville and Lambertville to Red Bank," he says. "It was really quite exciting. (The fellowship) encouraged me to focus my attention to activities going on in New Jersey. I wanted to figure out what that might be, so I first looked at the Arts Council's Web site and saw this rich list of all kinds of groups that use music in one way or the other — from a cappella choirs to chamber groups, bands, orchestras and dance companies. There's a lot out there. I dragged my wife all over New Jersey — it seemed like every weekend we were doing something.

"My principal aim was making artistic connections," he continues. "But in the process, I found myself serving as an informal ambassador from the Arts Council, getting a feel for what was happening around New Jersey and spreading the word about Arts Council programs of mutual benefit."

One of the musicians he met was Frank Mazzeo, a member of the New Jersey Saxophone Quartet who is also on the NJSCA. That meeting proved especially fruitful, and a friendship and musical collaboration flourished as a result.

"Frank introduced himself to me and invited me to write a piece," Mr. Zuckerman says. "He gave me a copy of the quartet's CD and I loved it. I played saxophone and was always taken with wind music. With saxophone quartets, they either lean toward popular/jazz music or they play classical, but this quartet handles both very well.

"Writing for a sax quartet is very interesting," he continues. "There is so much repertoire for string quartet, it's hard to get them interested in new, original music. But when you hear a performance by a saxophone quartet, the music is usually written by people who are still alive, so it's music that really is in the now."

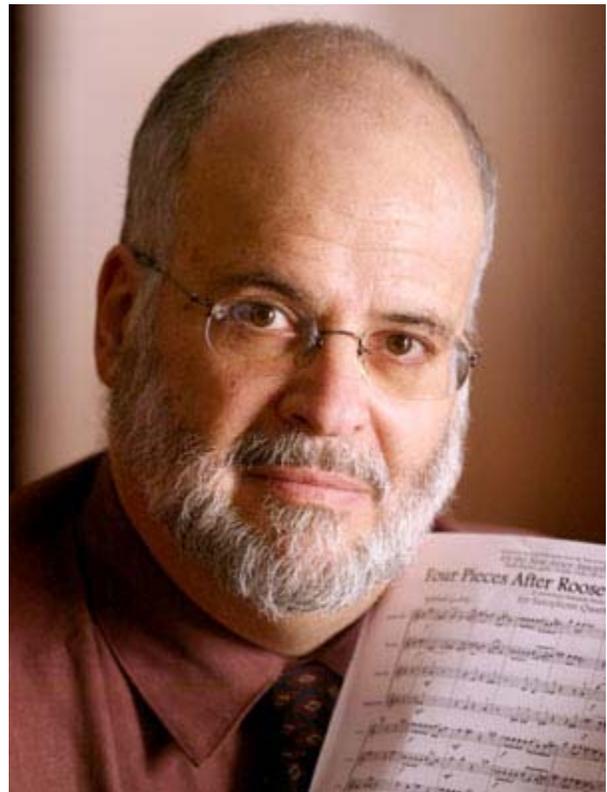
The NJSQ will perform a concert of Mr. Zuckerman's music at the Peddie School in Hightstown March 6. Co-sponsored by the Roosevelt Arts Project and CAPPs, the concert features the premiere of "Four Pieces After Rooseveltians for the Roosevelt Arts Project" ("4PAR4RAP"), commissioned last year by the NJSQ.

The movements celebrate the lives of a quartet of Mr. Zuckerman's late, great neighbors — Sol Libsohn, Judy Trachtenberg, Ed Schlinski and Bernarda Bryson-Shahn. Given more time, Mr. Zuckerman says, he could write another four movements for another four Rooseveltians quite easily.

"As I was working on it, the characters of the individual pieces started to remind me of people in Roosevelt I had known well," he says. "The fact that these four people came to me was really more about the character of the music than the people themselves. Bernarda was the first person I met when I moved here and I rented the house next door to hers. In fact, I was working on (her movement) when she passed away. That event actually crystallized the piece for me. I thought 'this belongs to Bernarda.' I treasured my time spent with her, as I did with all the others."

The finale of "4PAR4RAP," Ms. Bryson-Shahn's Movement, is the most structured of the four sections, Mr. Zuckerman says.

"Even though the ideas are apparently simple, their construction is tightly constrained and the manner they weave together is intricate," he writes in the notes for "4PAR4RAP." "The result is a complex yet upbeat fabric, reflecting for me a salient



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feature of Bernarda's persona. She had a talent for putting complex ideas together, but in a simple way."

Another creative connection Mr. Zuckerman made on the road last year was with Dr. William Berz, director of bands at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.

"He's been very supportive of my work," Mr. Zuckerman says. "In fact, he commissioned a piece for the Rutgers University Wind Ensemble, which he performed last year. And he directs the Raritan Valley Symphonic Band, which also performed an older piece of mine, 'Marche Comique.'"

And Mr. Zuckerman met Randy James, founder and artistic director of Randy James Dance Works, based in Highland Park. The encounter led to another commission for Mr. Zuckerman. He's working on a piece of music to accompany a new dance by Mr. James, to be premiered in the fall.

"We met at the Arts Council meeting in February," Mr. Zuckerman says. "Both of us received fellowships. We also got a commission from the Dodge Foundation as part of the 'Live Music for Dance program of the American Music Center.' So I'm working on a piece for Art Feller, the principal flutist for the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, to be presented in New York and New Brunswick next fall."

Mr. Zuckerman had his first public performance at age 11, with a piece he wrote for his grade school orchestra. His formal music studies began at the Juilliard Preparatory Division and continued at the University of Michigan, Bard College and Princeton University, where he earned his doctorate in 1976. He has taught music at Princeton and Columbia University — everything from a popular jazz survey course and computerized music to graduate courses on esoteric 20th-century music theory.

In addition to teaching, Mr. Zuckerman is a prolific composer, with original work published by Carl Fischer, Ludwig Music and his own Mazic Music, among others. His pieces have been recorded by the Rutgers University Wind Ensemble, the Seattle Sinfonia, the New Jersey Saxophone Quartet and Chicago a Cappella. He's also published a number of scholarly and technical papers on jazz.

His next project is *The Outlaw and the King*, a chamber opera based on the Old Testament story of David and Saul, with a libretto by David Herrstrom, Mr. Zuckerman's neighbor in Roosevelt.

"This is the first time we've worked together and neither of us has written an opera," he says. "It's been a terrific experience collaborating with him, helping him shape the libretto. It's so easy for us to get together because he lives across the street."

In fact, just a few weeks ago, the RAP held a reading of Mr. Herrstrom's libretto, a work in progress.

"There were about 50 people at the reading and they were rapt," Mr. Zuckerman says.

If the purpose of the NJSCA fellowship was to energize a homegrown New Jersey artist, then the Arts Council chose wisely when they selected Mark Zuckerman.

"It was a very productive year for me, not only the quantity of work I did but the quality of the people I met and the kind of opportunities they've generated," Mr. Zuckerman says. "I'm in a much stronger place now than I was a year ago."

Works of Mark Zuckerman *will be performed by the New Jersey Saxophone Quartet at the Mount-Burke Theater at the Peddie School, South Main Street, Hightstown, March 6, 2 p.m. Tickets cost \$10. For information, call (609) 490-7550. Co-presented by the Roosevelt Arts Project and CAPPs. On the Web: www.peddie.org/capps. Mark Zuckerman on the Web: www.mazicmusic.com. The New Jersey Saxophone Quartet on the Web: www.njsaxophonequartet.com*