JIM DILTS

A Leading Light in Baltimore’s Jazz Community

By Bob Jacobson

THE BALTIMORE JAZZ COMMUNITY lost one of its leading lights in early May. Jim Dilts, 81, was aptly described in Mark Reutter’s memorial article in the Baltimore Brew as “A Renaissance man who left Baltimore with a richer heritage.” In addition to writing books on Baltimore architecture and railroad history, Dilts shared his lifelong love of jazz through journalism, documentary films and concert promotion.

Although his beat for the Baltimore Sun was primarily transportation, Dilts occasionally reviewed jazz shows at the Civic Center for the paper and reported on John Coltrane’s last concert, which took place at the Famous Ballroom on May 7th, 1967. In 1991 the Sun published his freelance article on the Left Bank Jazz Society, “Ghosts of the Famous.” City Paper was much more receptive to Dilts’s writing on jazz, which included an extensive 1995 piece on pianist Ellis Larkins, “Baltimore’s Gentleman of Jazz.”

Ray Wise, an artist and boat builder, describes Dilts as “some-what reserved, but into a lot of vibrant stuff. He was crazy about these jazz types.” One of those “types” was Baltimore-born-and-bred tap dancer Baby Laurence. To tell Laurence’s story, Dilts delved into documentary filmmaking. He hired Bill Hancock to direct and produce, and secured funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Maryland Committee for the Humanities, and the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities. The resulting film, Jazz Hooper: The Story of the Legendary Baby Laurence, was released in 1981. It may be viewed in four parts on Youtube.com.

Dilts and Wise attended so many Left Bank concerts at the Famous Ballroom that they were “part of the furniture,” according to Dilts’s friend John Ferguson. After Left Bank was forced to leave the Famous Ballroom and its concerts became less frequent, Dilts and Wise began a four-year-long series in the ‘90s called Jazz in Cool Places. The series was the perfect melding of two of Dilts’s passions, jazz and architecture. Concerts were held in many of Baltimore City’s most beautiful historic buildings. Either Dilts or a local architect would introduce the concert with a brief talk about the venue’s architecture. Wise, who now lives on the Eastern Shore, says that they secured foundation funding for the first year or two but really struggled financially along the way. Each concert cost about $5,000 and drew about 150 people. They provided hotels and meals for the artists. Four volunteers did most of the work: Dilts, Wise and their wives. Despite the financial demands that made the series unsustainable, Wise points out that it was “never a flop musically.” Take a look at the sidebar and you’ll see that Dilts and Wise brought to Baltimore some of the best jazz available in the ‘90s.