



BY CANDI PUREN

# artView

## Loss of a Legend

A day in the life of the late Omaha jazz musician Luigi Waites, spent with artist Jean Mason

There are individuals in one's life that make a difference. An impression. They leave you better than when they found you.

Jazz musician Luigi Waites, undeniably a legend in Omaha, was that person for many of us.

Luigi's passing on April 6, 2010, wrenched the hearts and souls of his beloved Omaha audience. Crowds made their way into North High School on Sunday, April 11 to celebrate his life and on the April 12, St. Cecelia's Cathedral hosted family, friends and fans for his funeral mass.

Walking out of St. Cecelia's that day, peering out at everyone who came to honor Luigi, I smiled. Artists, bankers, bikers, attorneys, students, musicians, cabbies, teachers – all sat side by side to collectively grieve the loss of a dear friend. All ages were represented. All colors. And we all called Luigi friend.

I decided to republish a piece I wrote in May 2007 about Luigi this month. It was April 2007, and I had heard that he and artist Jean Mason were spending time in her studio. His unquenchable thirst for learning, his childlike curiosity, led him to ask Mason about how she made art. Fortunately, he agreed that I could spend the day in the studio with them, quietly shooting photos and taking copious notes.

### artView/May 2007

Omaha jazz great and noted vibraphonist Luigi Waites and artist Jean Mason have forged an unlikely friendship that began with casual conversations about cooking and drum corps. Yes, that's right – cooking and drum corps.

"Luigi and I discovered that we both were involved with drum corps," Mason explains. "Turns out that when I was in junior high and in the drum corps in Illinois, Luigi was an instructor in Omaha."

This powerfully talented duo couldn't be more different. Mason smiling, always ready to embrace whatever's next with a moment's notice, and Waites, quiet, steady, almost uncomfortable with his fame.

Their conversations over the years have evolved from everything from cooking to ultimately art and music. Since they both joined the Summer Arts Festival board, their friendship has solidified and re-

cently Waites told Mason that he wanted to know more about how she "did what she did." That set events in motion for these two artistic souls to spend some committed time together in Mason's studio.

You can probably imagine what happened during their studio time: lots of music, to be sure. Lots of paint. Lots of laughing. The following is an accounting of one of their recent sessions.

On a sunny day in her Carter Lake studio, Mason has prepared three large underpaintings that appear to be mock-vibraphones (think similar in appearance to the xylophone and marimba but the keys are in wood) for Luigi to finish painting. They are in black and silver and are waiting for Luigi's "paint notes."

With jazz playing, Mason shows Waites what he will be painting with: she has fashioned a pseudo mallet (a drumstick with a Styrofoam ball attached snugly) that he can dip into various colors of paint. He then closes his eyes and plays his "vibraphone" (the paper canvas). He plays yellows and blues and white and then eventually uses red (Mason's favorite color) to complete the piece.

"How will I know if a painting is done?" Waites asks.

"When your head is empty, that's when," Mason tells him.

"But my head is never empty," Waites says.

"There's always more music."

And so their bantering goes.

Waites is eager to know, to learn. Mason is soon explaining how to communicate light and shadows while explaining which colors on the color palette "simply won't mix well." They discuss how the word "composition" means much the same in music as it does in art: the arrangement of elements. Also a topic for discussion: what do the high notes look like? What color would they be?

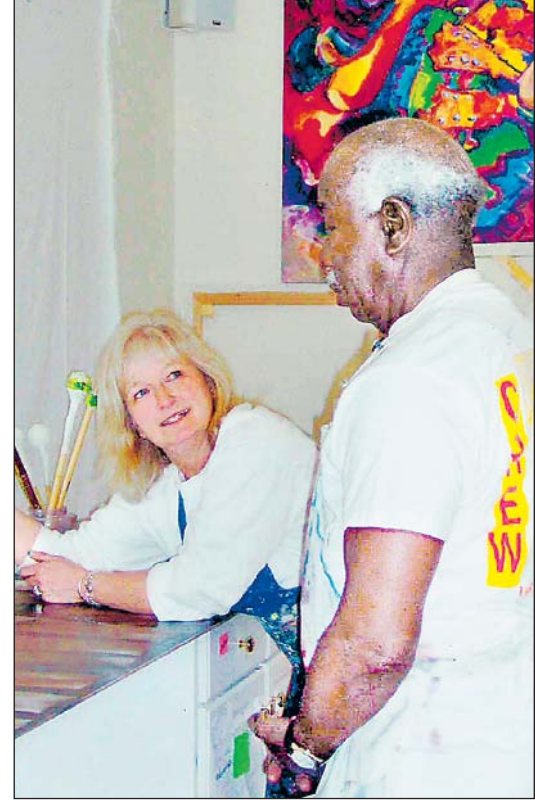
"To me, red means action... fire. Lively. Movement," offers Mason. "It seems contrary though, since red also means stop. Warm colors are active, cool colors peaceful. It's not a logical thing... just emotional, intuitive. If I were to write music, I'd make it in color... loud notes would be red and almost as loud would be yellow."

Luigi didn't see it the same way as his studio mate. When asked about how colors would sound, what color the "notes that matter" would be, he was very clear.

"It would depend on the music and that particular painting," he replies.

This is a man who spares his words – but not, lucky for us, his music.

As he explains the difference between a vibra-



Artist Jean Mason and Omaha jazz great Luigi Waites.

phone and a marimba, mallets and resonators, Mason goes to her laptop and Googles "vibraphone." Imbedded in the Wikipedia definition is a photo of Waites playing at a tribute to Duke Ellington in July 1999 at Jazz on the Green on the Joslyn lawn.

"Look Luigi! You're on the Internet!" Mason squeals.

Waites is unsure at first. He stops his painting and looks up, disbelieving. He has not been remotely interested in this Internet that Mason is having him see.

After much begging, he stares at the screen and sees his picture, reading the accompanying Wikipedia profile. This quiet, gentle man has never seen his image on the screen before. It is a moment to witness.

True to his demeanor, he simply shrugs his shoulders and says, "it's wrong."

"It's wrong?" Mason asks.

"Yes. It's wrong. I did not play with some of those bands that it says I did. I only played with the house bands when those musicians appeared."

Mason laughs. "But when we look up the instrument you play, YOU are part of the definition of it. Don't you think that's neat?"

Waites smiles and turns back to his work. Colorful notes flying from his musical ala painting mallets. He seems much more intrigued with getting that "note that matters" splashed on his painting.



Waites with paint mallets.

If you are also intrigued with the "note that matters," donations can be made to the Luigi Waites Jazz Scholarship Fund, Dundee Bank, 5015 Underwood Ave., Omaha, NE 68132.