ASU Kerr to present a multimedia concert performance of Langston Hughes’ “Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz” featuring the Ron McCurdy Quartet, March 8 - 21

The Langston Hughes Project is a multimedia concert performance of Langston Hughes' kaleidoscopic jazz poem suite, “Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz.” This is Hughes' homage in verse and music to the struggle for artistic and social freedom at home and abroad at the beginning of the 1960s. It is a 12-part epic poem which Hughes scored with musical cues drawn from blues and Dixieland, gospel songs, boogie woogie, bebop, progressive jazz, Latin cha cha, Afro-Cuban mambo music, German lieder, Jewish liturgy, West Indian calypso and African drumming – a creative masterwork left unperformed at his death.

Originally, Hughes created “Ask Your Mama” in the aftermath of his participation as an official for the five-day Newport Jazz Festival of July 1960, where he shared the stage with luminaries Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Horace Silver, Dakota Staton, Oscar Peterson, Otis Spann, Ray Charles and Muddy Waters. The musical scoring was designed to serve not as mere background but to forge a conversation and a commentary with the music. Though Hughes originally intended to collaborate with Charles Mingus, and then Randy Weston on the performance of this masterwork, it remained only in the planning stages when Hughes died in 1967. Its recovery now in word, music and image provides a galvanizing experience for audiences everywhere.

Utilizing engaging videography, this concert performance links the words and music of Hughes’ poetry to topical images of “Ask Your Mama’s” people, places, events and to the visual artists Hughes admired or collaborated with closely over the course of his career, including the African-inspired mural designs and cubist geometries of Aaron Douglas, the blues and jazz-inspired collages of Romare Bearden, the macabre grotesques of Meta Warrick Fuller, the rhythmic sculptural figurines, heads, and bas reliefs of Richmond Barthe and the color-blocked cityscapes and black history series of Palmer Hayden and Jacob Lawrence. Together the words, sounds and images recreate a magical moment in cultural history that bridges the Harlem renaissance, the post World War II beat writers’ coffeehouse jazz poetry world and the looming Black Arts performance explosion of the ’60s.

The performance is brought to life by the extraordinary talents of the Ron McCurdy Quartet. Dr. Ronald C. McCurdy is professor of music in the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California (USC) and is Past-President of the International Association for Jazz Education (IAJE). Prior to his appointment at USC he served as Director of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz at USC. He has released two CDs. The first one titled, “Once Again for the First Time” on the INNOVA label and the most recent CD titled “April In Paris” with his vocal funk group, The Ron McCurdy Collective. He is co-author of a vocal jazz improvisation series titles “Approaching the Standards,” published by Warner Bros.

McCurdy is the director of the National Grammy Vocal Jazz Ensemble and combo, and also serves as Director of the Walt Disney All-American College Band in Anaheim, Calif.

McCurdy has performed with a host of legendary jazz artists including Wynton Marsalis, Joe Williams, Rosemary Clooney, Terence Blanchard, Leslie Uggams, Arturo Sandoval, Diane Schuur, Ramsey Lewis, Mercer Ellington, Dr. Billy Taylor, Maynard Ferguson, Lionel Hampton and Dianne Reeves. He is a performing artist for the Yamaha International Corporation.

If you would like more information about this event, the curriculum guide developed for students or would like to schedule an interview with Dr. Ron McCurdy, please contact stacey.bailey@asu.edu