

Union alumni in the news



A Fine Line



Bill Vitek and Dan Gagliardi

## A “Fine Line” between work and play

**BILL VITEK '79**

Buried on page 16 of Bill Vitek’s curriculum vitae is an unlikely entry

for a professor of philosophy: jazz pianist and composer.

Not a typical academic resume. But Vitek '79 is no typical academic. The professor of philosophy and ethics at Clarkson University (and frequent visiting professor at Union) has just released his fourth CD, a collection of standards and originals titled “A Fine Line.” His collaborator, bassist Dan Gagliardi, is a professor of mathematics at St. Lawrence University.

In the late '70s at Union, Vitek hauled his heavy Fender Rhodes keyboard up and down the stairs of South College to gig with a rock band called Jupiter Hollow that evolved into a jazz group.

He took a jazz improvisation class at Union with the late baritone sax great Nick Brignola, a reluctant grader who at the end of the course asked the students to assign themselves a grade. The self-critical Vitek, on the verge of becoming a professional musician, gave himself a B+.

In a literature course, Vitek convinced the late Prof. Hans Freund to excuse him from a

written paper and allow him to compose a jazz piece based on the text of the Medieval French epic *Song of Roland*. Freund turned him loose at a grand piano in his office above the Rathskellar, and Vitek rewarded the professor with musical progress reports and a final concert that brought the house down.

“Union provided me the creative time and space for playing and composing and thinking of myself as a musician,” he said. “I was encouraged enough by these experiences to think I could pursue music professionally.” For several years after graduation, the Schenectady native continued to study with Frank Stagnitta and made a living playing jazz in the Capital Region with Doc Scanlon’s Rhythm Boys and a number of other groups. He cut expenses by sharing an apartment in Albany, “rolled in the dough” during the summers, and patched together gigs during the winter while working at a bookstore and giving private lessons. “I’m sure I was panicked back then,” he said. “But looking back, it was fun and easy.”

(Among his students at the time was a promising six-year-old, Max Heinegg—also profiled this issue—son of Prof. Peter Heinegg. Max’s mother, Rosie, helped arrange a teaching job for Vitek at Brown School. Vitek later married Max’s aunt, Maria.)

It didn’t take long for Vitek to notice that except for a select few at the top, professional musicians do “a whole lot of weddings and bar mitzvahs.” His parents, who had long encouraged his music, were also practical about the long-term prospects for a jazz musician in upstate New York. So Vitek announced that he would pursue a career as a professor of philosophy. “Talk about jumping from the frying pan to the fire,” he recalls. Even while a professional musician, he kept a strong interest in philosophy, collaborating with Professors Fred Elliston and Bob Baker on their book, *Philosophy and Sex*. He was awarded a scholarship to City University of New

York, and his parents were “at least happy that I was in something structured.”

At Clarkson since 1987, Vitek specializes in environmental ethics, civic philosophy and community studies. He is director of the Clarkson Ethics Institute, coordinating programs that focus on ethics and the professions. He has three books to his credit, a number of articles, a string of grants and several awards for outstanding teaching. And he keeps alive a passion for jazz.

Vitek had been playing with a jazz trio throughout the North Country for 10 years when in 2003 he met Gagliardi, himself a former pro who had played with Tom Harrell, Bruce Barth and Steve Hobbs. The two got together, liked what they heard and began “playing out” at any venue that would have them.

Vitek, whose thoughtful and spare playing is like that of jazz legend Bill Evans, considers himself an accompanist to Gagliardi’s bass, which he says is “like a massage.” Their current 13-tune CD contains



DiPietro with fellow musician Dr. Richard Lewis '70 (left)

standards like a measured and thoughtful "My Foolish Heart," which features Gagliardi's swooning bass, and a bouncy "Bye Bye Blackbird," which turns Vitek loose. There are two originals—the duo's "Blue State Blues" (inspired by the last presidential election) and Vitek's "AICetekonic" (based on blues riffs he composed for each of his children — Andrew, Ian, Carolyn and Elizabeth). The title of the CD—A Fine Line—refers to the "fine line" of a catchy melody as well as the balance they achieve as academics and musicians.

Performing as a jazz artist and teaching have a lot in common, according to Vitek. Both require a connection with the audience, a high level of competency and the ability to improvise.

"For me," says Vitek, "it's the connecting. When a student says they get it, that's very rewarding. The same goes for an audience who gets it."

Vitek cites the old show biz standard: "We're having a lot of fun, but we won't quit our day jobs."

And he's grateful for his time at Union. "A good liberal arts education encourages people to do not just one thing," he said. "We should think about what we do in our spare time."

"At 48, I'm playing the best music of my life."

## MICHAEL A. DIPIETRO, M.D. '70: THE BASSOON

### BEAT GOES ON FOR RENOWNED PEDIATRIC RADIOLOGIST

In 1965, a young bassoonist at Colonie Central High School got a call he'll never forget.

It was from the principal bassoonist at the Albany Symphony Orchestra, calling on behalf of the conductor, Edgar Curtis.

Curtis, also a professor of music and chair of the Music Department at Union, needed a bassoonist for the College's woodwind quartet.

"I had just started 11th grade," recalls Michael DiPietro '70, M.D. "Every Friday afternoon during my junior and senior years, I would find a ride to campus and rehearse.

"That evening phone call was a chance happening that turned into a lifelong opportunity for me."

Opportunity—at Union, in his chosen career and at the University of Michigan, where he practices medicine and plays music—was the subject of a talk recently by DiPietro upon being named the first John F. Holt Collegiate Professor of Radiology at the university's medical school.

A pediatric radiologist there for 23 years, DiPietro is recognized as a pioneer in the use of sonography for the diagnosis of spinal cord anomalies in children. He spoke on "Chance and Opportunity: A Michigan Story," at his investiture ceremony. Union (which, coincidentally, produced the first president of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, Henry Philip Tappan, Class of 1825) is a big part of that story.

#### MUSIC AND SCIENCE

It was Professor Curtis who encouraged DiPietro to apply to Union, where he studied science.

With Curtis' recommendation, DiPietro went on to win the Elmer Tidmarsh Scholarship in music. At Union, he also was influenced by John Girdner, professor of psychology, "who taught me how to carefully observe and document behavior in children," and Carl George, professor of biology, "who taught me how to write lab reports carefully and concisely."

He traveled to Austria with Fred Klemm, professor of German, on the College's inaugural term abroad in Vienna in 1969, "the first time I had ever been on an airplane," DiPietro recalled. "That experience broadened my life, and I am forever grateful to Professor Klemm and to Union for providing me with that opportunity."

DiPietro also enjoyed singing in the Union College Glee Club and Madrigals, led by Professor of Music Hugh Allen Wilson.

#### MUSIC STILL A FORCE

Today, DiPietro lives in Ann Arbor with his wife, librarian and archivist Alice Fishman; their son, Corey, is a graduate

student. Co-director of the Musculoskeletal Ultrasound Society, DiPietro has appeared in the Best Doctors in America and has received numerous professional awards and appointments.

Still playing his bassoon, DiPietro is a member of the University of Michigan's Life Sciences Orchestra (LSO), which he helped found five years ago. He is also in his 16th year with the Campus Symphony Orchestra (CSO).

#### UNION RECONNECTION

It was through the CSO that Dr. DiPietro rekindled an old friendship. He and Richard A. Lewis '70, M.D., played together in the Union orchestra in the late 1960s.

"When Rich moved to Michigan to join the faculty at Wayne State University School of Medicine as associate professor of neurology, we were reunited in the CSO—30 years after we had played together at Union," DiPietro said.

If success can be defined as "loving what you do and doing what you love," as DiPietro believes, then balancing a life in medicine with a love of music makes him a very successful man, indeed.