

The Visiting Artist Program:

A Quiet Place for an Artist An Unforgettable Year for a Community

by Peggy Payne

Columbia Artists presents Tenor Michael Best," announces the promotion poster. The Metropolitan Opera also presents Michael Best. For several seasons he has been a principal artist at the Met, the nation's principal stage for the performance of opera.

Only a few years ago, Fayetteville Technical Institute was presenting this voice to audiences, a voice that the *Boston Globe* critic said "sounded like the best lyric tenor in America." It was the Visiting Artist Program, an effort of the North Carolina Arts Council and the state's Department of Community Colleges, that first introduced Fayetteville to Michael Best.

"I can't imagine having stumbled into a situation that benefited me more," Best said of his year in Fayetteville. Fayetteville also received benefits. During his 1976-77 residency there, Best performed as many as two or three times a day. He performed in a different church every Sunday, sang with the community's choral groups and college singers. He worked with the players in high school musicals. He even sang a few high notes in a high school physics lab to help a teacher teach the principles of sound.

Michael Best is one of the artists who have been "visiting artists" in a community in North Carolina. His is a highly visible success story—but in more ways than one. Best not only became an accomplished, successful performer, he also left some of himself in a North Carolina town. For that artist, for that community, and for the art itself, that's an experience that can never be taken away.

In a theater in Rockingham that once played X-rated movies, David Ariail now directs plays, recently Arthur Miller's *The Price*. "When I got through, I felt like I'd done something," said Steve Morris, a local jeweler, who played a policeman in the play.

Louise Anderson is a folk artist and a storyteller. She is a black woman who dresses in caftans and bright colors in a western town where very few black people have ever lived. "I'm very visible," she says, laughing. She tells the stories of her own parents telling. And the mountain people who hear her begin to remember stories from their own culture and kin.

A poet, in another town, reads at a Kiwanis Club dinner; a painter puts up a scaffolding and works for months on a mural on the wall beside the pool at a YMCA. No one forgets. The artist grows. The town itself is better because an artist came to visit.

Five musicians "visited" eight North Carolina schools in the year 1971-72. That was the first year. It was called Musicians-in-Residence then, before painters and poets and storytellers and other artists joined these troubadours. A model for the program was the system of visiting artists at North Carolina State University, said Henry Bowers, NCSU associate vice chancellor for student affairs and the member of the N.C. Arts Council whom many credit with the idea for the statewide Visiting Artist Program. Bowers himself says he was one of many who helped in the beginning, including former N.C. Arts Council Director Edgar Marston.

"My response to it," said Dallas Herring, then chairman of the State Board of Education, "was that it was a wonderful idea." It was in keeping with what community colleges try to do—to bring cultural opportunities to all parts of the state. Ben Fountain, former head of the state community college system, "found a number of institutions that were willing to try it," Marston said, "and we were off and running."

So it began in 1971 with a budget of \$50,000, supplied jointly by the N.C. Arts Council and the State Board of Education. Three pianists, a harpist, and a guitar player went out to counties that reached from west to east. "We got rave notices that first year," Sam Ragan recalls. Ragan, North Carolina's poet laureate, was N.C. Arts Council chairman at the beginning of the program. "We were the first in the country to do this, to have a statewide visiting artists project [within the community college system]."

It was an idea that attracted attention. Loren Tice, a successful concert pianist, became intrigued and took a year out from his usual schedule. "Isothermal Community College in Spindale signed him on," remembers Ragan.

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"The whole community responded. Before the year was out they formed an arts council, which they had never had before. They set up a little theater group, and they formed their own symphony orchestra." The town staged three musicals that year, and all three received good reviews. "The whole atmosphere in the community changed just because of that one man."

Now many communities have been touched by artists, and many artists have had this opportunity to perform their art. The size of the program jumped from 5 to 17 artists in two years, and then doubled the next year. By 1978-79, 45 artists were "in residence" in community colleges throughout the state, supported by a budget of about \$790,000. In May of 1979, artists, teachers, students, and parents came to a Raleigh public hearing on the program. Their testimony and tales glowed with the benefits of the Visiting Artist Program.

A visiting artist "played the piano on the back of a flatbed truck," said a past president of the Johnston County Arts Council. The artist on the truck, participating in a fall arts festival, was Gary Towlen. Since that performance, he has played with the North Carolina Symphony. Younger artists have also benefited. "I am a student of the fifth grade class at Rose Hill-Magnolia Elementary School," wrote Tripp Watson, who couldn't attend the public hearing. "I especially liked being able to participate in classical saxophonist Miller Sigmon's workshop, for I am studying saxophone."

For the visiting artist, the technical or community college is merely a base. The artist does not teach formal classes. Instead he or she reaches as far as possible into the surrounding community. Any type of artist may apply for a residency that lasts from nine months to a year. Sculpture, photography, music, dance, the art of video and film, printmaking, crafts, fiction, poetry, and painting—those are some of the arts in which residencies are available. An artist who is chosen may serve at one school for two years, and remain in the program for as long as four years.

Applicants should be artists who have demonstrated a career commitment to their art form. A master's degree in the artist's discipline, or the equivalent through extensive experience and training, is required. Panels of professional artists and educators review the applications and make choices on the basis of artistic merit and achievement. Those who pass this screening may be interviewed for positions by the sponsoring schools.

The artist who is chosen then works to become a community arts resource. The ways of doing this differ with the art and the artist. They

may include workshops, lecture/demonstrations, exhibitions, classroom activities, readings, productions, and concerts. The artist and the sponsoring school have complete flexibility in choosing and planning these events. The artist and a coordinator at each school work together in setting up a schedule. And that schedule always includes time set aside for the artist's own self-development and for the practice of his art.

More than 300 artists have now lived and worked as visiting artists in North Carolina communities. There are 58 community colleges and technical institutes in the state; in 1982, 52 of these campuses chose an artist to bring into their communities. Some of the few that do not have a resident artist have made that decision because of the school's location in an area that has a high concentration of artists and cultural programs, said Bobby L. Anderson, who handles the program for the Department of Community Colleges. Wayne Martin, former artists-in-residence coordinator of the N.C. Arts Council, points out that community college presidents have also chosen not to participate in this program because they must spend the funds on the Visiting Artist Program and may not use them within the overall budget of the community college. For most of North Carolina, "it is a tremendous service provided by the institution," Anderson says. "I don't know of another program in the country that is handled this way." The total budget has risen from \$50,000 in 1971 to \$1.1 million in 1982.

In the years of sending artists to the towns and rural counties of the state, the quality of those artists has steadily improved. The requirements, and the panels of jurors who choose artists, have become stricter, explains Mary Regan, director of the North Carolina Arts Council. "The standards have gotten higher as we've gone along."

The communities where artists have visited have also changed. It's easy to see where a talented artist, with an additional talent for reaching people, has visited. "The Visiting Artist Program in a quiet way, a natural way, has inspired so much arts activity," Regan said. "They have smoothed the way for a lot of arts groups to get a good start, because they prepared the people."

This process now is quieter than it once was in some communities, where artists had rarely performed and where they had never shopped in the local grocery store or picked up cleaning in the local dry cleaners. Now these towns have grown accustomed to being home for a tenor, a poet, or a pianist. And now the artistic performances that brought headlines in local newspapers ten years ago are part of the daily life in these North Carolina towns. □