

To: Larry Huntley, Eric Lewis, Dave Smith, Howard Tuvelle
From: Jim Pegolotti
Date: November 24, 1997

Re: Information on the Archive Collection at Columbia College, Chicago
on James Furman

Yesterday, I thought to investigate the information on the Internet from the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College, Chicago. This is where the majority of Jim Furman's materials reside. What I found I have appended to this letter.

Let me back-track a bit. When Ruth Lanham, Jim's executrix, contacted me years ago to indicate that some of Jim's books and miscellany were left to the University, she indicated that the vast amount of holdings were given to Morgan State. At that time, Dominique-René de Lerma was a faculty member there, but shortly afterwards, he moved to Columbia College, Chicago, and its Center for Black Music Research. Jim's materials moved with him.

We do not have too much material here, but I do believe we should provide future students and researchers with the sense of who Jim was. Again, I would ask you if you could, over the holidays, write a short essay about Jim as you remember him. Perhaps you might address the following questions at the very least:

- 1) What were Jim's best traits as a teacher?
- 2) What musical events based on his music do you recall most vividly and/or fondly?
- 3) Are there stories that Jim told that you could share?

One reason I am asking you to spend a little time on these reflections is that I would like to put together our archival material this coming year (and I'm not going to be around for many more years to do it!) Are there others you might suggest I contact?

Thanks very much.

JAMES FURMAN

I met Jim in 1970, when I was hired as a pianist at Western Connecticut State College, in Danbury. In 1971 I took a large apartment across the street from the college, and it was there that Jim would visit almost daily. We had a large dining room and he often joined us for dinner. I was married and had a son around the age of five.

Over the 19 years of our friendship I found that Jim lived solely for his music. He was an accomplished pianist, not in the concert performing aspect, but he played extremely well and with a most natural technique. His compositional work was rarely discussed with others, except superficially, as he maintained a very private inner life as well as a social one, except for attending parties given by colleagues. He loved parties because he loved to eat, and I recall that his plate was always full of food, several times over! His pipe (he smoked a pipe and always smoked *HALF & HALF* pipe tobacco, except when I gave him various tobaccos to try) and its aroma, could be smelled in the halls of the building. In his office he smoked continuously and often made coffee. He liked to teach informally in his office, scheduling most of his classes, when size permitted, in his office. And he loved to be surrounded by students. He had a bachelor's gift in recruiting other people to help him. Of course, he lived alone and spent little money on himself or others. He sent money home to his mother, back in Louisville, Kentucky, where he'd spend his summers.

His knowledge of the standard music repertory was complete, and it was the high level of his musical taste that was one of his distinctive traits in teaching others. When directing the chorus he would tackle many of the larger works in the literature, and this exposure was much needed for the level of students most state colleges attract. Added to this was his extraordinary enthusiasm in teaching such works to the students. His commitment and intensity for such music would inspire them to reach levels of performance they never thought possible. On the podium and during an actual performance, Jim was as athletic as two Bernsteins! His leaps were legionary.

Yet, there was something shy about him. He deplored departmental friction, and would attempt to remain neutral. He could not cope with anger and fled from it. He didn't like to be part of any faction, for any cause, and would often say that he preferred to channel his energies into his compositions.

He had an enormous energy for music-making, and creating. Only until the last year or so of his illness was this lost. During his best years he would stride through the halls at a fast pace, always exuberant and teasing either student or colleague. He abandoned the only car he ever owned and when I knew him he walked to and from the school. He often gave parties at his apartment for students and faculty alike. I always sensed that he preferred students over his colleagues, except for a very few. Certainly he enjoyed youth more than adults. And of "difficult people" his favorite word in describing them was that they were like a "persimmon." Only, he would render it "parrrrr...simmon-ny"..... or, "par-snipity" -probably he meant it as an all consuming description that also implied parsimony as well as parsnip. He enjoyed these "p" words in describing people he didn't like, and he'd pucker his lips and impersonate them! Such people are "sour," he'd say.

Jim had more to offer than faculty politics would often permit. He was capable of teaching composition and all theory courses, but I think that often these courses, the best of them, went to other more aggressive members. And I believe that he felt discrimination very strongly but never put it into words. He, I believe, still suffered from that sense of social inferiority that Martin Luther King and others tried to dispel. Jim was uncertain about what the administration and others considered his place in a mostly white school. The more militant blacks, I'm sure he felt, considered him a bit of an "Uncle Tom".... The only thing Jim truly trusted, was music. He was ALL music. He, himself, was very sure and secure in his role as a composer, teacher and faculty member. He helped to inaugurate a Spring Arts Festival and brought many other composers and musical celebrities to the campus. He worked very hard and put in many hours beyond teaching to do this. And he loved doing it, being in the "thick" of a project working toward a musical goal.

I believe that Jim was a religious person.....not in formal practice, but at the core of his being. I say this from overhearing remarks, references.....and from how religious themes wove their way into our conversations. For nearly a full year I can honestly say that we had dinner, at my home, every evening. Much conversation took place, and without remembering specific topics, one comes away from it all with a flavor of, a sense of the essence of what a person is all about.

One day when visiting him at his apartment, as he often asked for a ride because I passed there on my way home in later years, he took out the materials of his book. He was, I believe, working on the problem of how to notate some of the responses that accompanied the musical process known as *lining*. This process, growing out of the southern Baptist religious service, would feature, usually, the minister in addressing the congregation...in pitch, --but not always--and they, in turn, would ad lib over his central message. I believe something close to the minister's role would be called *Sprechstimme* (speech song) in contemporary musical language or definition. Of course, this was only one part of his entire book and its intended scope.

During the last couple years of his life he became suspicious, moreso, of others. Distrustful might be the word. He removed from his office all his books and recordings and sent them to Kentucky. When his health began to fail he often appeared to be struggling to get through the day. He wanted as simple a teaching schedule as possible. Of course, not knowing the gravity of his illness -no one did- and as chairman of the department I tried to make his load as light as possible. When he conducted the last concert of his life, he was but a shadow of the real Jim. No animation, no leaps, but just a gallant effort even to raise the baton!

When his death became known, the department, spearheaded by the students, gave him a memorial service. It was typical of Jim's own informality that many of the students came forward to tell of their personal association and experiences in knowing him.

Jim was sitting in my office just a week before his end, in a somber mood, and I attempted to cheer him by reading poetry. I read a poem by Thomas Moore: **On Music -Air, Banks of Banna**. He was quite taken by it and said he wanted a copy, that he'd like to put it to music. And in that poem, I believe, there expresses what I believe was the essence of how he felt about music and, perhaps, life. The last verse says it:

**"Why should feeling ever speak,
When thou (music) canst breathe her soul so well?
Friendship's balmy words may feign,
Love's are even more false than they;
Oh! 't is only Music's strain
Can sweetly sooth, and not betray."**

--Howard Tuvell Jan. 5, 1998