

ROBERT NICHOLAS FELDER



Robert Nicholas Felder is the last of twelve siblings born to Porter and Minnie Felder in Tampa, Florida. His early interest in music was first developed on a trombone that was handed down from his brother, Billy, whose increasing focus on sports would lead to considerable success in the Negro Baseball Leagues, most prominently with the Newark Eagles.

In his youth, Felder developed quickly, both academically and musically. By the time he graduated from Tampa's Middleton High School at 16, Felder was already working in and arranging for dance bands. Among his earliest band mates was none other than the legendary Ray Charles. Felder played trombone and Charles keyboards in one of Tampa's most popular bands, Charley Bradley and the Honeydrippers. In addition, the Adderley brothers, Cannonball and Nat were among his close acquaintances growing up in Tampa.

At 20, Felder earned his BA in Music at Fisk University under the tutelage of the legendary John Work. The rigorous demands that Work imposed on his students, served Felder well. After a brief teaching stint in Tampa, Felder was swept up in the Korean War draft. He was one of the few African Americans selected to attend the Air Force's principal Band School at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. He was later assigned to Bolling Air Force Base as an arranger with the Air Force's premier marching and concert band, making him one of five African Americans in the band. By the time of his discharge, Felder was the band's main arranger and conductor. When not on tour, he played jazz engagements around Washington with Air Force colleagues like fellow trombonist Sammy Nestico and saxophonist Tommy Newsome.

By the time Felder left the Air Force he was well established as a performer in Washington and beyond. He was a regular at Evans Bar & Grill, the area's top rhythm and blues ballroom. He worked with and led groups that featured some of the Washington's top jazz musicians, including Keter Betts, Charlie Byrd, Roger "Buck" Hill, and Shirley Horn. Felder also added organ and keyboards to his arsenal, headlining a group at the fashionable Rhode Island Plaza Spotlite Room at the height of jazz popularity in Washington, DC.

Felder determined that playing private dances/functions could be more lucrative than working the club scene, whether it was rhythm and blues or jazz. He has prospered on the private circuit with his group, Bobby Felder and His Blue Notes. Initially, performing on weekends proved a better fit with his employment as Band Director at Kelly Miller Junior High School and his pursuit of a Masters Degree at Catholic University. Attendees at Inaugural Balls from Kennedy to Clinton have danced to the sounds of Bobby Felder and His Blue Notes.

In 1969, Felder was appointed to the music faculty at Federal City College (FCC). It was the beginning of a 23-year journey as the Director of Instrumental Music with what evolved into the University of the District of Columbia (UDC). At his retirement in 1992, Bobby Felder's fingerprints were all over the development of instrumental music and Jazz Studies in Washington, DC.

Among his first appointments at FCC was Arthur C. Dawkins, whom he recruited from T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, VA. After Dawkins left FCC for Howard University, Felder recruited the late Calvin Jones. It was Felder and his protégées, Dawkins and Jones that have built the Howard University and UDC Jazz Studies Programs to the point of prominence they hold today.

He assumed a prominent role in the establishment of the Felix E. Grant Jazz Archives at UDC and was influential in shepherding the archives to the level it is today. Robert Nicholas Felder has not been complacent in retirement. He continues to work private affairs with his Blue Notes and has developed a big band, The Capital All-Stars. For the last six years, Felder has served as Director of Jazz Services at Peoples Congregation Church, leading Bobby Felder and Friends. Their recordings include "Amazing Grace" and "The Spirit of Jazz" and "Christmas Jazz at People's Church."