

DORTHAAN KIRK



Twelfth Annual

Donald Meade Legacy

Jazz Griot Award

Dorthaan Kirk

January 5, 2023



**DONALD MEADE LEGACY
JAZZ GRIOT AWARD**

JANUARY 5, 2023

What is a Griot?

The Griot emerged from West African traditions as a storyteller, historian, chronicler, and keeper of the timeline. The Griot in short, remembers through word and song all of the important events and experiences of a particular community. The Griot holds sacred the collective memory of a community preserving it for posterity.

The Donald Meade Legacy Society in conjunction with the African American Jazz Caucus confers the 12th Annual Donald Meade Legacy Jazz Griot Award to *tireless jazz advocate*, Dorthaan Kirk.

Dorthaan Kirk has been steadfast and relentless in her chosen pursuit to orchestrate a better world. Called “Newark’s First Lady of Jazz,” Kirk has been active as a curator and producer of jazz events primarily in and around Newark, New Jersey, and is an avid supporter of musicians and jazz education for children.

Kirk grew up in Texas and lived in California before moving to the East Coast in 1970 with husband Rahsaan Roland Kirk, the blind multi-instrumentalist with a reputation for fierce musicianship and daring improvisation. Though he played with Charles Mingus and recorded with Quincy Jones, Mr. Kirk more frequently led his own bands. Dorthaan was already a jazz fan before marriage, but her husband introduced her to more musicians and new venues, and she had a chance to absorb the culture of jazz and became more knowledgeable about jazz history through him, while managing his career.

When her husband died unexpectedly in 1977 at age 41, Kirk wanted to continue working in the jazz business/world. She was introduced to Bob Ottenhoff, who was working on getting the Newark Board of Education to transfer their underutilized broadcast license to create the first public radio station in New Jersey to a full-time jazz station. Kirk was one of the original employees that launched WBGO in 1979. Before retiring in 2018, Kirk was the special events and community relations coordinator; the curator of the station’s art gallery, which is open to the public; and managed the annual WBGO Jazz-a-thon as well as the WBGO Children’s Jazz Series, which offers free jazz concerts by top-name musicians specifically for young people since 1993.



By 1978, when she was hired by WBGO, Newark’s public jazz station, she had immersed herself in the scene. “I knew record company people, I knew producers, I knew stuff that jazz people

understood I knew but I didn’t fully know I knew,” said Kirk.

Tammy Lagorce, NY Times

Dorthaan Kirk has been a major force at WBGO Jazz 88.3 FM, Newark Public Radio—the only full-time jazz format station in New York and New Jersey—working in various roles for more than four decades.

Kirk has been active for decades presenting jazz events in the Newark community. In 2000, she coordinated with the Rev. Dr. M. William Howard Jr. of the Bethany Baptist Church in Newark to present free-of-charge monthly Jazz Vespers, live jazz events during the months from October to June, that have featured nationally renowned performers, such as Jimmy Heath, Jon Faddis, and Gregory Porter. Since 2012, Kirk has been the consultant producer for a monthly jazz brunch series titled “Dorthaan’s Place” in her honor at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center’s Nico Kitchen & Bar in Newark. In addition to recruiting talent, she has also acted as master of ceremonies for these events.



She continues to be the keeper of the flame of her late husband’s musical legacy: managing his music; acting as administrator of his publishing company; and organizing special events in his honor, such as the tribute at St. Peter’s Church in New York City in December 2007.

Kirk has been the recipient of numerous awards from the City of East Orange, City of Newark, and New Jersey State Assembly for her community-based initiatives in the arts. In 2013, she received the Humanitarian Award from the American Conference on Diversity, Essex County Chapter. For her 80th birthday in 2018, the Dorthaan Kirk Scholarship Opportunity Fund was created to support jazz students in the Newark area.



Newark’s First Lady of Jazz, “*What an honor to be acknowledged in such a big way for the work I love to do in jazz. I will continue my work to the best of my ability as long as I’m allowed to.*”