

Robert N. Felder

Robert “Bobby” Nicholas Felder, born in Tampa, Florida, was the last of 12 siblings. His interest in music was first developed on a trombone that was handed down by his brother Billy; a successful Negro league baseball player. In his youth, Mr. Felder developed academically and musically, graduating from Tampa’s Middletown High School by age 16, and playing and arranging music for dance bands. The great Ray Charles was an early bandmate in one of Tampa’s most popular bands, Charley Bradley and the Honeydrippers.

At the age of 20, Mr. Felder earned a Bachelor of Arts in music at Fisk University under the tutelage of the legendary John Work. The rigorous demands Mr. Work imposed on his students served him well. After a brief teaching gig in Tampa, he was drafted into the Korean War and was one of the few African Americans selected to attend the principal Air Force 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, one of only five African Americans in the band. By the time he was discharged, Mr. Felder was the band’s main arranger and conductor and was a well-established performer throughout Washington D.C. He was a regular at Evans Bar and Grill, the area’s top rhythm-and-blues ballroom and performed with some of D.C.’s finest jazz musicians, including Keter Betts, Charlie Byrd, Roger “Buck” Hill, and Shirley Horn. When not on tour, he played jazz engagements with Air Force colleagues, such as fellow trombonist Sammy Nestico and saxophonist Tommy Newsome. Felder also added organ and keyboard to his repertoire, headlining a group at the fashionable Rhode Island Plaza Spotlight Room at the height of jazz popularity in D.C.

Believing that playing private dances and functions could be more lucrative than working the club scene, Mr. Felder prospered on the private circuit. Though his role as band director at Kelly Junior High School and his pursuit of a master’s degree at Catholic University were Felder’s primary focuses, attendees of the inaugural balls of presidents from John F. Kennedy to Bill Clinton danced to the sounds of Bobby Felder and His Blue Notes.

In 1969, he joined the music faculty of Federal City College—a 23-year journey that culminated in his appointment of director of instrumental music at the University of the District of Columbia. By his retirement in 1992, Felder had played an enormous role in the development of instrumental jazz and music studies in Washington, D.C. He also assumed a prominent role in the establishment of the Felix E. Grant Jazz Archives at UDC and was influential in shepherding the archives to its current level.

Mr. Felder has not been complacent in retirement. He continues to work private affairs with his Blue Notes and has also developed a big band, The Capital All-Stars. For the last six years, Mr. Felder has served as director of jazz services at Peoples Congregational Church, leading the group, Bobby Felder and Friends. Their recordings include *Amazing Grace*, *The Spirit of Jazz*, and *Christmas Jazz at Peoples Church*.