Dr. Donald C. Johns, Professor Emeritus of Music at the University of California, Riverside, passed away Sunday, July 14, 2013, following a cardiac arrest at his home in Riverside. He was 87 years of age. In his 36 years of distinguished teaching Prof. Johns taught thousands of undergraduate and graduate students. He was the third member of the founding UCR Music faculty, joining it in 1957 as an instructor, and called himself “the third man,” after the film of that name. He was appointed Assistant Professor in 1959, Associate Professor in 1965 and full Professor in 1971, a position which he held until his retirement in 1991. He also served as chair of the department. After he retired, he taught for two additional years, at the request of the university.

The other UCR Music Department founders were William Reynolds and Edwin J. (Ted) Simon. Dr. Johns contributed enormously to the growth, development and recognition of the UCR Music Department, and to UCR as a whole. The death of Dr. Johns marks the passing of the founding generation of UCR Music faculty.

Dr. Johns was born on June 9, 1926, in Chicago, growing up in its suburbs and attending regional schools. He received his Masters from Northwestern University in Illinois. He continued his musical education in Vienna, Austria, and received his PhD in Music Theory and Composition from Northwestern in 1960. Prof. Johns considered himself a music theorist and composer, and contributed to both fields with numerous articles of musical analysis and a large body of original compositions. He was best known for composing music which was rich with melody, textured with ranging emotion, and deep with an evident mastery of form. He composed numerous pieces for Lutheran church choirs,
many of which became standard repertoire in churches around the country. Recordings of Dr. Johns’ secular works are available on CDs. His motto was “good music does not have to be complicated.”

In 1993, two years after Professor Johns’ formal retirement, KUCR manager Louis Vandenberg offered him a position as a program host at KUCR 88.3fm, UC Riverside’s radio station, to be part of a Tuesday jazz program block he had envisioned. In addition to Dr. Johns, this block included UCR Founding Professor, the late Dr. Francis Carney, former Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Robert Herschler, acclaimed historian, author and scholar UCR Professor Sterling Stuckey. Over the years, this program block also has included the late legendary jazz musician Oscar Brown, Jr., who was serving as a Regent’s Lecturer and Dr. David Fairris, UCR Professor of Economics, Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and formerly Associate Dean for Student Academic Affairs in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. The program also has featured numerous students doing programs as part of their extracurricular experience as undergraduates at KUCR. Jazz expert Lee Farley, long time administrator in the UCR School of Education, joined the lineup 7 years ago. In his weekly program Dr. Johns, who was known on the show as “Dr. J”, revealed and illustrated his encyclopedic knowledge of jazz musicians, musical styles, compositional and arranging techniques, and the connections between the elements that make up the world of jazz, from its beginnings to the present day. On July 2, 2013 Dr. J marked exactly 20 years on the air at KUCR in the 1pm – 3pm Tuesday time slot. A broadcast tribute to him was aired on July 16 of that year.

Louis Vandenberg spoke of Dr. J in his broadcast tribute, “He was obviously in declining health in recent months, and he saw my concern and sadness. ‘Don’t cry for me, Louis,’ he said. ‘I’ve had a great life. I loved being a professor. I loved UCR. It’s a great place, a great school. I loved doing the radio show. I’m dying with no regrets.’ It made me think — all the people and things we love will come to an end, and there is loss and tragedy. But, Don showed me that there’s much more to the story. After being an undergraduate student of Don’s, and then being his friend and colleague at KUCR, the best lesson he taught me was his last. He knew he was close to the end, but he had no fear, no regrets, only joy and gratitude for having lived and experienced it. His passion for music kept him doing his radio show, the last one being less than two weeks before he died. He came to the studio the last time, aided by his son Karl due to his physical condition, and that inspired me. It was an epic personal effort to do one more show, to connect, to say I was here, alive on this planet, and I loved it all, and to say goodbye. That’s just beautiful — the best.”

KUCR Program Director Eduardo Valencia agreed, “I found Dr. J’s spirit in these last few months to be even stronger than in my previous years of knowing him. He was totally aware of what was happening, and it was very touching that he came to KUCR to do that final show. He had to have had very spiritual feelings about his time on this planet. It came through in every way.”
A May 28, 2013 interview with Don in which he talks about his life, his experiences at UCR, KUCR and his love of music can be heard below and on the KUCR Archive page.

Dr. Johns left his wife Jorun, daughter Alessa, sons Karl and Andreas, son-in-law Christopher Reynolds and grandson Gabriel. The passing of an excellent person and great musical mind is mourned by all his listeners and many friends.

This memorial was compiled and adapted by Kenichiro Tsukamoto.

Sources: