

Steve Colson Self-Sufficient Gifts

Even though pianist Steve Colson has yet to become a household name after more than 30 years in jazz, the title of his latest disc, *The Untarnished Dream* (Silver Sphinx), speaks volumes. The name comes from one of the song's lyrics about life itself as a gift.

"A lot of time we can get too wrapped up in the commercial aspect of music and life," Colson said. "We don't really stop and appreciate life and being able to share with others."

Colson has been sharing his musical gifts with a wide cast of musicians, thanks, in part, to his long involvement with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM). For his new disc, Colson called bassist Reggie Workman and Andrew Cyrille to play along with his singing wife, Iqua Colson. Casting a balance between post-modern bebop and free-jazz, Colson recasts songs that were originally composed for larger ensembles. He says that when he writes, he often hears elaborate harmonies and contrapuntal melodies that call for different voices. "In terms of thinking of the content, I try to get the most bang for the buck," he said.

The AACM also taught Colson self-sufficiency, a quality that comes through nearly every aspect of *The Untarnished Dream*, from

the disc artwork that the pianist created to his ownership of the label (along with his wife).

"The AACM taught us that you have to pursue your own vision even if you have to fight an uphill battle," Colson said.

Colson was familiar with uphill battles, though, before joining the AACM in 1972. When he arrived in Chicago from East Orange, N.J., in 1967, he attended Northwestern University to study classical piano during a time when the institution was deciding to allow more black students on its campus. The school didn't have a program for jazz when he arrived.

"You couldn't practice jazz at Northwestern," Colson laughed. "If someone heard me playing jazz in the practice room, they would bang on the door."

Still, he met some kindred spirits, most notably Chico Freeman, with whom he formed a jazz band that played at various local events. It was with Freeman in 1968 that he first discovered the AACM through a poster advertising a Fred Anderson concert.

Colson and Freeman explored more AACM concerts and eventually joined. At the same time, Northwestern started a jazz program. Colson remembers trying out: the director asked him to play a song and improvise but it



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couldn't be a blues. Colson played Bobby Timmons' "Dat Dare" and was disqualified because the teacher said to not play the blues.

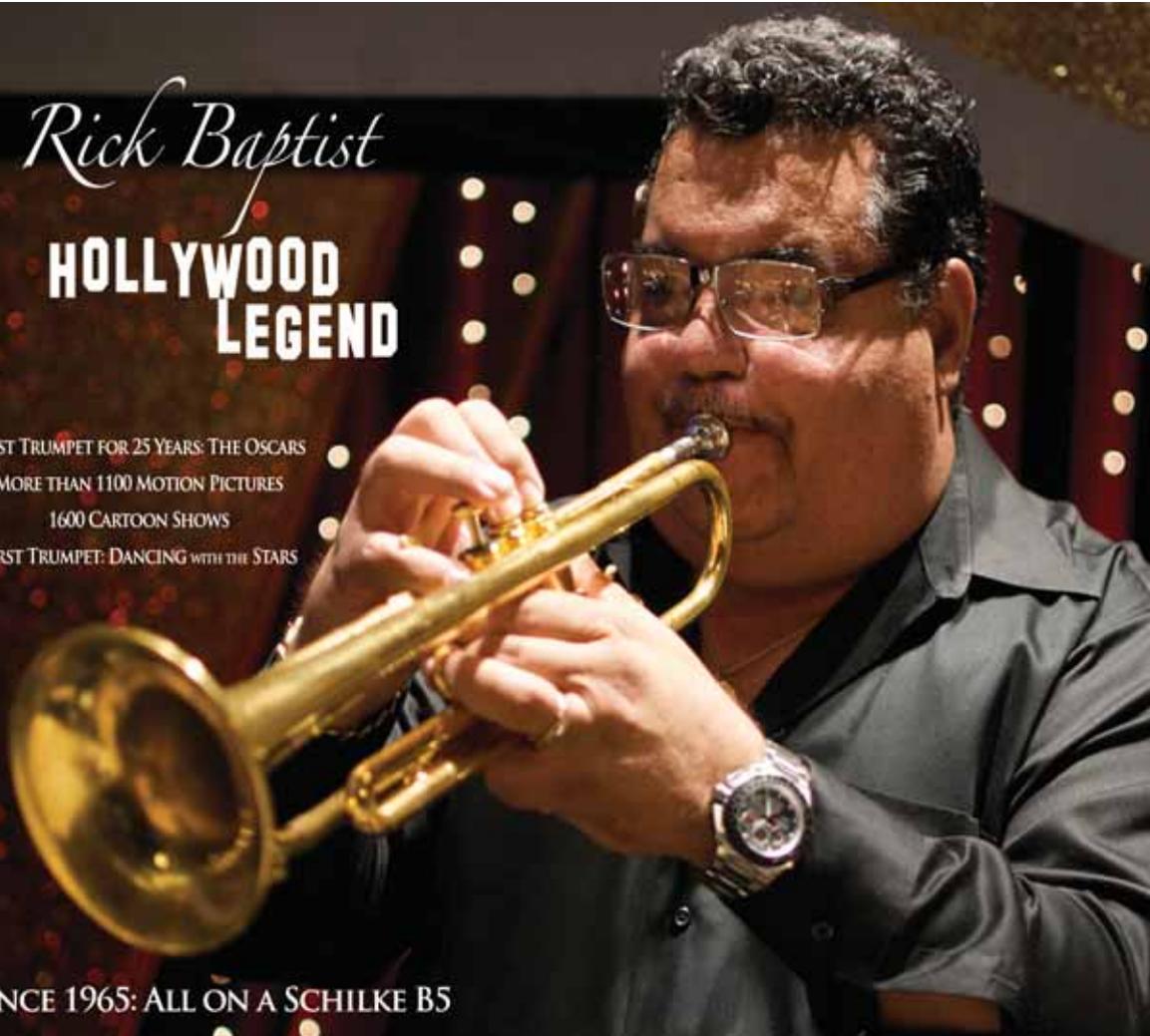
"But it wasn't a blues tune—it's bluesy," Colson said. "This guy didn't know the difference between a blues and a popular song structure. One of the guys who did get in the band would call me and ask how to play the piano changes on the charts that they had."

Which is something else he can laugh about now. —John Murph

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