



'A CHARACTER FOR ALL'

Sculpture honors local jazz icons past, present, and future

Story and photos by Amanda Karioth Thompson, Arts Consultant



In addition to "The Jazz Man," the Cooley family has created other life-size bronze statues of musicians including Ray Charles and Otis Redding, both on public display in the iconic artists' hometowns.

Sculpting came early to Bradley Cooley, Jr. By the age of five, he was already working with modeling clay alongside his father, Bradley Cooley, Sr., who was introduced to the artform by his father-in-law, Thomas Edward Alcorn.

By the age of 13, Cooley, Jr. had completed his first bronze. In the decades that followed, father and son created dozens of life-sized bronze sculptures together until Cooley Sr.'s death in 2017.

Cooley, Jr. is now passing on the family tradition to the fourth generation. Nineteen-year-old Holden Cooley assisted with his father's latest triumph, "The Jazz Man." A tribute to local jazz icons past, present, and future, this life-size bronze figure represents the long lineage of musical masters that have called Tallahassee home.

Located within the market area near the Pinellas Street roundabout on FAMU Way, "The Jazz Man" occupies a space that has experienced significant change. African American businesses thrived in the area from the 1930s to the 1980s and the restaurants, bars, and lounges provided performance opportunities for emerging and established musicians.

Florida A&M University brought legendary jazz educators and artists into contact with locals who would go on to become masters of the genre, teaching and inspiring others in return. That exponential effect helps account for the stunning number and variety of celebrated jazz musicians with ties to Tallahassee such as FAMU graduates and brothers Julian “Cannonball” and Nathaniel “Nat” Adderley, among many others.

Conversations about a jazz tribute sculpture had been swirling for years with little traction. Thanks to support from a community group led by former County Commissioner Mary Ann Lindley, “The Jazz Man” was finally realized as part of The Blueprint Intergovernmental Agency’s History and Culture Trail. This project seeks to recognize and honor the historical contributions and cultural impact of the communities adjacent to the FAMU Way Corridor, an east-west roadway from South Monroe Street to Lake Bradford Road.

Part of the Blueprint Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 Project, the History and Culture Trail represents a \$1.1 million investment that leverages a \$315 million Blueprint infrastructure investment in the Southside.



The sculpture was cast at Inferno Art Foundry and weighs 300 pounds.

After years of extensive research and community involvement, informational panels will be installed along the 1.5-mile trail to display images and historical material about the neighborhoods, businesses and individuals who lived and worked in the area. The Trail will also include 12 new pieces of public art, the most significant infusion of outdoor public art in Tallahassee-Leon County history. These works are vital in further enhancing and interpreting historical accounts while offering additional opportunities for engagement.

The inclusion of art into any environment plays a significant role in sustaining cultural identity and creating a sense of place. The return on investment is substantial. Public art serves as a tourism driver, encourages lasting economic growth, and contributes to business development. It fosters community pride, connects citizens to their shared history, and makes cultural heritage a tangible community asset.

One of seven artists invited to create artwork for the History and Culture Trail, Cooley, Jr. is a celebrated sculptor working from his expansive studio located 30 miles outside Tallahassee. A stickler for detail and accuracy, he enlisted the help of internationally acclaimed local musician Scotty Barnhart.

This two-time Grammy Award winner, jazz trumpeter, composer, arranger, educator, author, and Director of The Count Basie Orchestra posed for the structural framework, known as the armature, and served as the model for the sculpture's body and hands.



"I'd lay on my back for hours to get the details on the heels of the shoes and the stitching on the pants," said Cooley Jr.

The process is exacting. Once the metal armature has been welded, Cooley, Jr. begins to construct the figure using a permanently pliable, oil-based modeling clay. "I build an anatomically correct body, without clothing first. Once I confirm the measurements and everything looks good, then I start applying the clothing. I do the shirt first and bring the pants up to the shirt. Then I add the jacket. It's all done in layers, just like how you get dressed. I just make it out of clay."

For the sculpture's head and face, Cooley, Jr. created a composite of features from many different individuals. "I didn't want to use any particular face," he said. "The main thing was trying to make him a character for all. I wanted anybody who walked up to him to feel like this is my buddy or this is uncle so-and-so."

Once sculpting is complete, the complex mold making process begins. Cooley, Jr. explains "a rubber latex mold is made, then a plaster mold goes over top of that. Next, a three-dimensional wax impression is created out of that mold. The waxes are in 5-6 major pieces, the legs, torso, arms and, in this case, trumpet. We then dip them into a ceramic dip in a big vat with a big mixer in it, like pancake batter. Pull that out, dip again. It builds a shell around that wax. Once that dries, the whole thing goes into a 2,000-degree furnace and the wax runs out. Now we've got a hollow ceramic shell, the wax is gone. That's why it's called the 'lost wax' process."

Molten bronze is then poured into the ceramic shells, filling the nooks and crannies of the negative space. The excess bronze is poured out and, once cooled, the ceramic is chipped away revealing the hollow cast pieces which are then welded back together.



Bradley Cooley Jr. with "The Jazz Man."

The entire sculpture is heated again, and an acid is applied which absorbs into the metal. This creates a rich and durable surface patina which, over time, will show evidence of visitor interaction.

"This guy here, I guarantee his right shoulder will have a lot of wear. People are going to put their arm around him."

That literal embrace and gentle engagement is exactly what Cooley, Jr. hopes for. Made with meticulous care and craftsmanship, "The Jazz Man" tells an important part of our ever-unfolding story. It symbolizes and celebrates the universality of music, the generational passing of knowledge, and the depth and breadth of talent we have in our community.

"I've done a number of pieces all over the country, but this piece is special. I'm humbled to do it and I think it'll be a great addition to our area. I hope the people of Tallahassee can enjoy it."

To learn more about Blueprint's Capital Cascades Trail Segment 3 Project, click here: <https://blueprintia.org/projects/cct-segment-3-amenities/>