

Byrd reluctantly to have a day in the spotlight By Stephen Snyder, Times Staff Writer Friday, June 06, 2003

Eric Byrd, the jazz musician and director of the successful McDaniel College Gospel Choir, was ambivalent about the idea of an Eric Byrd Day.

"Put in big, 18-inch letters that this was not my idea," said Byrd last week from his home in Westminster.

On Saturday, Westminster Mayor Kevin Dayhoff will officially announce Eric Byrd Day following Art in the Park on Westminster City Hall grounds.

When Byrd found out he was going to be honored in such a conspicuous way, the naturally humble pianist decided to use the publicity and create a music scholarship in honor of his father.

"I don't think anybody should have that kind of attention without using that attention for something worthwhile," said Byrd.

The scholarship, called the William J. Byrd Jazz Scholarship, will give one Carroll County middle or high school student the opportunity to attend Common Ground on the Hill's Jazz Institute, a section of the annual two-week art festival dedicated to jazz instruction.

According to Byrd, his father William wanted to learn to play the saxophone as a boy, but couldn't afford the 25-cent lessons from the music teacher.

Byrd said he came up with the idea for the scholarship after hearing about Eric Byrd Day as a way to deflect some of the attention.

"I don't like anything that smacks of fame, celebrity or attention," said Byrd. "That's not really my bag."

But Byrd and his band, the Eric Byrd Trio, have attracted a lot of attention. Besides playing locally at numerous festivals, including the annual Flower and Jazz Festival, The Eric Byrd Trio has performed internationally, playing in Switzerland and Bolivia.

In 2001 the trio was selected to be a jazz ambassador to South America by the Kennedy Center and the State Department. As part of that, the group did a six-week tour of Latin America. **In July, the City of Westminster will send the group to Estonia as part of the cultural exchange.**

Byrd is also a member of the music faculty at McDaniel College, where he directs the Gospel Choir.

"Eric Byrd is just such a wonderful asset to this town," said Dayhoff. "The purpose of the day is to recognize an enormous talent in this community."

The idea for Eric Byrd Day originally came from Al Betz, director of the Life Histories Center in

Westminster. After Byrd returned from South America, Betz convinced him to record his memories at the center. Those recordings became the basis for a book on the trip called "A Life's Journey in Six Weeks."

Betz, who is working on a larger book about Byrd's life, approached the mayor about formally recognizing Byrd's accomplishments. The idea was floated to have Byrd's trio perform immediately after Art in the Park and Westminster City Recreation supervisor Ron Schroers worked out the logistics.

The only one left to convince was Byrd himself.

"Getting Eric to participate has been like pulling teeth," said Dayhoff.

But once Byrd hit on the idea of using the day to raise awareness of his scholarship, everything was set.

"If all these people think enough of me, then I guess it's OK," said Byrd.

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Eric Byrd Day

The Eric Byrd Trio will perform for Eric Byrd Day immediately after Art in the Park Saturday on the grounds of Westminster City Hall, Willis Street and Longwell Avenue in Westminster.

Art in the Park, put on by the Carroll County Arts Council, runs from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

For more information call the City of Westminster at 410-848-9000 or visit the Web site at www.ericbyrd.com.

To make a tax-deductible donation to the William J. Byrd Jazz Scholarship, call the Community Foundation of Carroll County at 410-857-3432.