Wilkes University
Commencement, May 23, 1992
Citation for the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Humane Letters

JOHN BIRKS "DIZZY" GILLESPIE

John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie, we honor you in absentia through your long-time friend, collaborator in jazz, master drummer and composer, Max Roach, for your extraordinary career as a professional musician and entertainer. For almost all of your seventy-five years you have entertained your fellow human beings with your own compositions, arrangements, and incomparable trumpet. Conductor of your own bands and orchestras, you also performed in many other of the great bands with colleagues who, together with you and Max Roach, constitute most of the great men and women of jazz, the major musical contribution of American culture to the world. Your own innovative approach to improvisation over complex rhythms supplied the father gene of bebop, and the music world has never been the same. Your compositions, your individual phrases and musical licks are recognized by lovers of jazz everywhere. Every instrument, every player in every jazz band has been influenced by your original genius and your unique musical voice. As your nickname "Dizzy" attests, you have laced this powerful and sophisticated musical legacy with great good humor, tickling your listeners even as you attempt to reach, their souls.

You have, since the 1950s, been an ambassador for jazz and for your native America to people on every inhabited continent. Through your music and now through your United Nation Orchestra you have brought young musicians from throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, and Cuba together with North Americans to combine traditional American jazz with Latin rhythms, a synthesis you were one of the first to foster. Not content to be limited to the admittedly great variety of expressive modes in your entertainer's arsenal, you have in your eighth decade turned to film as composer and arranger and also as actor in "Winter in Lisbon" to portray the crippling effects of racism on human beings. As you began celebrating this special birthday year with a schedule of performances all over this planet that would have been daunting to a performer half your age, your body finally talked back. Obey it and the loving orders of Lorraine, your wife and companion of more than half a century, so that your audiences can hear once more your always fresh tones. We trust that this recognition of your great contributions from your friends at Wilkes University will contribute to that healthful objective. It is with great pleasure and by virtue of the power vested in me by the Wilkes University Board of Trustees and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that I confer upon you, John Birks "Dizzy" Gillespie, the degree Doctor of Humane Letters, Honoris Causa, with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereto.