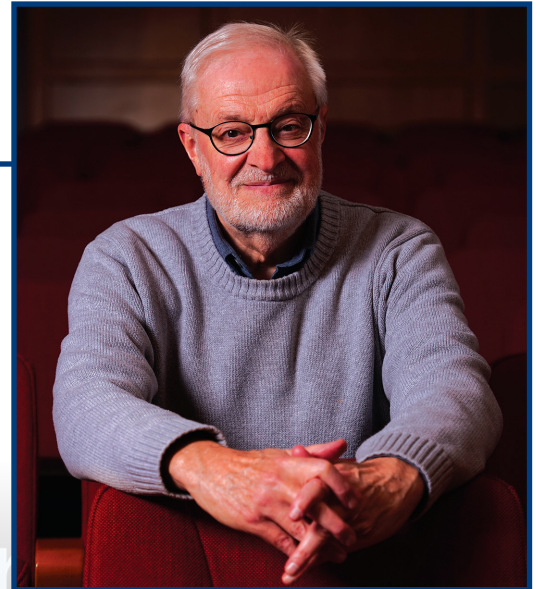


An Interview

with

Kurt Dietrich



Never Giving Up

The Life and Music of
Al Jarreau



WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY



WHS Press How did you first come to learn about Al Jarreau and what made his work in particular stand out to you?

In the second half of the 1970s, Al Jarreau was an ascending star in the music world. I was touring the country with a jazz band that was on the same record label as Al

Jarreau—Warner Bros. Like the band I was in, Al was exploring the music world between convenient labels. So, I found out about Al Jarreau. By the early '80s, I was very well aware of his records. His brilliant vocal abilities and exploration of music that included jazz, pop, and rock appealed to a wide variety of listeners, including me.



WHS Press You wrote about Al Jarreau in your previous WHSP book, *Wisconsin Riffs*. How did that biography grow from something shorter into an entire book devoted to a single musician?

I had already been deeply interested in Al's music and work prior to writing *Wisconsin Riffs*, as I taught for 39 years at Ripon College, Al's alma mater. After the excitement of the release of that book, and particularly after I retired in the spring of 2019, I was looking

for another writing project. Al had been dead for two years by then, and it didn't appear that anyone else was writing a biography of this major musical figure. I thought, "Why not me?" After making the necessary connections with Al's former manager, and with Al's family (in particular his sister Rose Marie Freeman), the project looked like something I could, and would like to, undertake. Needless to say, a great deal of research was needed to make the finished product happen.





WHS Press How did the research and writing for *Wisconsin Riffs*—a book containing small vignettes of many performers—compare to the work you did to create *Never Givin' Up*?

For *Wisconsin Riffs* I really wanted to present readers with as many short portraits that could

realistically appear in a book of reasonable size. It takes a tremendous amount of work to flesh out a life story, and a musical story, of someone as interesting and important as Al Jarreau. And all sorts of sources need to be utilized: print, online, personal interviews, archives, and in the case of a musician, recordings as well.



WHS Press While researching this book, you had the opportunity to conduct interviews with members of Al's family, as well as many of his friends, fellow musicians, and business associates. How did meeting those folks and hearing their stories make this book come together in ways you hadn't originally envisioned?

I tried not to have a preconceived idea about how the story in the book would go. I already knew the basic outline of Al's life and career. But I didn't know what would become the central "story" of that life and career. Frankly, most of what I found out in the interviews pretty much confirmed much of what I suspected about Al. But needless to say, an abundance of fascinating details emerged that I did not know. The interviews greatly personalized so many details of Al's story.





WHS Press Did your relationship to Al Jarreau's music change over the course of the research and writing of this book? What's one surprising thing you learned about him that you'd like to share with potential readers?

My relationship to his music did change as I went through this process. I had long had the “snobbism” of many jazz musicians, the tendency to look down on lots of pop and

R&B music. The more I listened to Al's music, though, the more I appreciated not only his great and obvious talent, but also the musical artistry that was involved in the crafting of much of his non-jazz music. Not just the superior playing and singing, but the way the albums were put together and produced. As for the second question, I'm not sure how surprising it is, but Al really, really did not wish to be pigeonholed musically.



WHS Press How did your experience as a musician and music teacher influence the writing of this book?

I always wanted to write about Al's music in the book, not just write the story of his life. My experience in music allowed me to be able to

communicate with Al's musical collaborators on a level that would not have been possible without that history. Having taught for so long, I also hope that I have learned how to talk about music in meaningful ways to students—and now write for readers—in ways that meet them on their level.



WHS Press If readers could only take one thing away from this book, what would you want it to be?

Al Jarreau was an exceptional musician and person, and he refused to let himself be defined or limited by an industry that strives to attach convenient labels to the artists that make that industry possible.

