

Dixieland concert remains constant

By Jim Windell
special writer

When you've got a good thing going, why change it?

This seems to be the formula that works for the Preservation Hall Jazz Band.

These hardy perennials from New Orleans amble into Meadow Brook Music Festival each summer in their wrinkled white shirts and ties. Sitting sedately on the stage, the mild and slightly paunchy men look bemused at the excitement they cause with the music that some of them have been playing for more than 60 years.

Their music — they did practically invent it — is authentic New Orleans jazz and it's been causing a lot of excitement at Meadow Brook for 13 years. Sunday night the band made its ritual appearance, and thankfully some things can be counted on in life.

The annual Preservation Hall Jazz Band concert is a musical lifeboat in a rough sea of uncertainty.

review

THE MEN ARE usually the same, although there are three bands that venture forth out of New Orleans Preservation Hall on St. Peter's Street. The program is just as predictable. But, like Christmas or the Fourth of July, you still look forward to it. After all, where else can you still hear jazz as it was played in the beginning?

Seventy-five-year-old Willie Humphrey walks on stage after other band members have begun playing "Hindustan," and later Willie, the clown prince of the outfit, performs his dance shuffle during "Tiger Rag." His clarinet solos remind as fresh sounding as always. His solo during "Basin Street Blues" is a model of control as he starts in a lower register and builds to a climax.

His older brother, Percy, shows each year that he can defy the ravages of old age. He never seems to lose his chops, as frequently happens with trumpet players, and in his solo he will intentionally give off a growl. During "Panama," he uses his hand for a mute, allowing a different growl effect.

The one change this year was behind the drum. Sixtyish Frank Parker filled in for Cie Fraier, who was taking a break from the almost constant touring, the band does. Parker acted like a young colt during his solo on the traditional "When the Saints Come Marching In."

Otherwise, the remainder of the band is the same. Relative youngsters Frank Demand and Allan Jaffe play trombone and tuba, respectively. The pianist is Sing Miller and the banjo player is Narvin Kimball.

EACH HAS his speciality number which the crowd looks forward to each year. Percy Humphrey gets to sing and

do his Tiger growls in the microphone as his brother cuts up during "Tiger Rag." Sing Miller handles the vocal on "His Eye is on the Sparrow" while Kimball plays the banjo in the background and then softly harmonizes with Miller during the second chorus.

Everyone solos during the two-part "Just a Closer Walk With Thee," which is usually the closing number before the traditional raucous encore of "Saints." The moody opening section of "Closer Walk" shows how pure Willie's clarinet can be when he chooses to play that way.

What everyone waits for with eager anticipation is the pre-planned encore. Stationing themselves at the corners of the stage, Demand and Willie Humphrey take their solos. When Willie starts his, he leads the march around the pavilion and back on stage for street dancing and general cavorting.

There's not much in the way of a surprise, but it wouldn't be summer without it.

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Belafonte pleases with varied show



Harry Belafonte played to big crowds for two nights at Meadow Brook Music Festival.

By Jack Ryan
staff writer

Harry Belafonte is probably best known for his calypso music, but he showed he was adept at any type of music during his nearly three-hour show last week at Meadow Brook Music Festival on the Oakland University Campus near Rochester.

Belafonte showed off an old love of his, which he refers to as "Third World Music." It comes from Africa and South America and it's as distinctive as Belafonte himself.

Joining Belafonte on the show was Letta Stovall, a beautiful singer from South Africa, who displayed a lovely voice on both African and English tunes. She spelled Belafonte who, unlike other performers, opens his own show.

Belafonte looked trim and fit. The 54-year-old singer, backed by a seven-piece band and six backup singers, moved easily through several soft tunes in his opening set.

Included were tunes from his new album, "Loving You is Where I Belong." Of particular note was a song written by Belafonte's conductor, Richard Cummings, titled "Something to Hold On To."

review

Meadow Brook usually only books an act for one night, but Belafonte was booked for two nights, and that wasn't enough because both shows were sell-outs. Belafonte has acquired quite a large following by appearing in Detroit for the last 25 years.

In a brief conversation with Belafonte before the show, the singer said, "This is the longest tour I have ever done. It will last 7 1/2 months. I plan on doing other projects for the next two years, so I wanted to perform in as many places as we could."

"I haven't recorded for nearly seven years, and when CBS approached me about a new album, I thought the time was right. I got to choose my own material, and I think my fans will like it."

Belafonte has a movie in the works. "The movie is called 'White Tiger' and it's about the first white football player at Grambling College," he said. I play Eddie Robinson, the Grambling coach. It was an excellent opportunity and I just couldn't pass it up. Robinson is a legend and I've been a fan of his for quite some time, so it was quite an honor for me."

HIS SECOND SET included all of his old hits, such as "Matilda," "Trouble" and, of course, "The Banana Boat Song" — much to the delight of the huge crowd who had come for just these songs.

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