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Jazz goes outdoors for lively, hotel lawn parties

For many people, jazz pianist Roy Meriwether dropped out of sight about 13 years ago after his "Popcorn and Soul" Columbia album.

He came to the surface for a breath of air in Detroit about a year ago when he brought a trio into Dummy George's. Now, he is proving he is alive and well under a yellow-white-striped awning at Dewey's Outside Inn Live every Wednesday and Sunday.

The Michigan Inn in Southfield has initiated a new music party twice a week on the lawn of the hotel. Wednesday evening, June 6, was the first such night of jazz and summer weather, and the combination was most agreeable.

The music of Roy Meriwether trio was as balmy and easy to take as the 75 degrees and a late afternoon sun that made a cool drink a necessity.

Meriwether's blues-influenced jazz was enjoyed by the after-work and business crowd relaxing in a casual atmosphere of the outdoors performance.

HIS TWO-HANDED percussive approach to jazz stirred the interest of this crowd, which was attracted as much to the green strip between the John Lodge Expressway and the multi-storied hotel as to the Meriwether trio.

When Meriwether figured this out, he chided the audience good-

naturally, reproving them for being in "your own thing" and suggested they listen to the music.

"It has a definite beat," he pointed out, "and it should make you want to use your hands." Many people responded. Those who had a drink and were standing found themselves in an awkward situation.

Meriwether's own "Underground Railroad" set his trio in motion, and his blues and gospel roots were clear. The measured rhythmic punctuations of bassist Joe Straws and drummer Rick Spies suggested the steady movement of a symbolic train.

The heavy four-four beat of his two capable sidemen established a swing feeling over which Meriwether improvised runs in his version of Erroll Garner's "Misty." His energetic and lightning-swift approach to the keyboard in this well-known standard and in "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" left no doubt that he wanted his audience to feel something definite in his music.

"MACARTHUR PARK" got a 10-minute version in which musical references were made to Ramsey Lewis. Meriwether is his own stylist, however, who offers some of his own ideas in improvisations that have plenty of soul.

It is obvious that he likes to stir up his audience emotionally.

While his playing had the right ingredients, this particular night was not the right crowd. Nevertheless, Meriwether's jazz is appealing and will make being outside of the Michigan Inn fun for the next few weeks through June.

The Meriwether trio also can be enjoyed indoors at the hotel Tuesday-Sunday after 9 p.m.

The outdoor parties will continue through the rest of the summer, featuring entertainment from Dewey's Parties run 5-9 p.m. Wednesdays and 3-7 p.m. Sundays —

JIM WINDELL



Joe Straws is the bass player in the trio.



Partygoers gather on lawn of Michigan Inn for outdoor music and drinks.



Loving couple enjoys being alone in a crowd.

Meriwether grew up with music

Story: JIM WINDELL
Photos: RANDY BORST



Roy Meriwether, jazz pianist, led the combo.

A self-taught pianist, Roy Meriwether began playing the piano at age three and gave his first concert at age four.

He grew up in a musical family in Dayton, Ohio but did not actually hear jazz until he was about 16 or 17.

"I was always in improvisation," the 35-year-old jazz pianist recalled, before an outdoor concert last week at Dewey's. "I didn't go into jazz until I got my first night club job. I played in a neighborhood night club in Dayton."

"I heard Oscar Peterson on record first, then started to listen to jazz."

"I didn't know exactly what the approach to jazz was. I soon learned that it wasn't something written. I found that it was just improvising around the theme as you are playing and I said to myself, 'I can do that.'"

IT WASN'T LONG before he was playing at a popular Dayton night club called The Tropics and was spotted by an agent. Word got around that he was a pianist to watch and Columbia Re-

cords soon signed him to a recording contract.

That association led to several LPs with Columbia and then with Capitol Records. In all, he has appeared on nine records under his own name.

"The last national album I did was 'Jesus Christ Superstar Goes Jazz.' The Nashville company that made that LP had some financial problems and the whole thing went down the drain and the record got no promotion," he said.

"I produced my own album in 1973 because I wanted to record some longer numbers. It was a successful venture, but it was too much work. I had to do my own distributing. It ended up that I was carrying the records around in my trunk. That became a pain."

"I called the label that record was made on. Singer: I was drinking a stinger one night and decided to call it that. Very creative. It has been plaguing me ever since."

MERIWEATHER regularly works the Hyatt Regency hotels and the Double Tree Inns on the West Coast. He has found in the last couple of years that more hotels around the United States

are booking jazz acts. College tours also have helped build a following for him.

Last fall, he appeared in concert at several New England colleges where his reception was enthusiastic.

He is the only piano player in a family of talented singers. However, he did have an uncle who was a keyboard player.

"Big Maceo Meriwether played around Detroit and also recorded for Epic and RCA Bluebird records. He was known back in Detroit's blues days as one of the greatest blues piano players of his time. Unfortunately, I didn't get to know him, as he died in 1952."

Roy Meriwether's influences include Oscar Peterson. "I play by ear, so I have to keep my ears open to what's being played. After I started listening to jazz, I'd listen to all the musicians. I'd go through the archives of pianists like young lawyers going through old law cases. I listened to Ahmad Jamal, Ramsey Lewis, Les McCann and also a lot of unknown gospel pianists."

"I also listened to vocalists. Singers have improvisation in their voices, too. Jazz pianists should try to be vocal in their approach."

"SO, I DON'T limit it to pianists. In order to create a style you have to listen to a lot of different things. You just might find your whole approach coming from a weird instrument, say an oboe."

In between night club and college concert jobs, Meriwether likes to compose. In 1973 the National Endowment for the Arts granted him a Jazz Composition Fellowship for the purpose of writing a musical work tracing the history of the black experience in America. The result of that project was "Black Snow," which became a multifaceted theatrical production uniting modern dance with song through a chorus and jazz trio.

He has more ideas for compositions and therefore does not like to take an eight-week engagement, such as he presently has at Dewey's. However, there is some compensation this time.

"It's been good here in Detroit because the advertisement has been excellent and people are coming to hear my music. I haven't had audiences in Detroit like the ones I've had here for a long long time."

By ETHEL SIMMONS

Fans of morning talk show host Vic Caputo not only can watch him on TV, over breakfast, but they can join him for dinner, too, in the audience for his performance at the Paradise Dinner Theater.

Caputo plays a millionaire with a mistress in the comedy "Any Wednesday," directed by Edgar A. Guest III of Birmingham. A Nancy Gurnin (of Southfield) Production, the show opened last weekend.

Performances continue Fridays and Saturdays through the summer in the Mediterranean Room of the Paradise, 17630 Woodward, north of Six Mile Road, Detroit. Dinner is at 7 p.m., the show at 8:30. Reservations may be made by calling 869-3998.

"I'm a child of the electronic media," Caputo said, during an interview on the set of his WJBK-TV Channel 2 live show "Good Morning, Detroit." At the studios in Southfield, he described his very TV-oriented approach to learning a stage role. "I record the whole show on tape and let it run. I give a line, stop the tape, then start," he said.

HE CAN LEARN a part driving to work and back from his home in Grosse Pointe. "I do all the parts," he said. "I recite all their lines."

On Broadway, "Any Wednesday" starred Sandy Dennis and Don Porter (Ann Southern's boss on an old TV series). The titillating comedy by Muriel Resnik also was made into a movie, starring Jason Robards and Jane Fonda.

"It's not a very nice person, Caputo said, describing the character. "He's a businessman used to getting what he wants. He has an executive suite, is used to being out of town and has a sweet young thing there (Kay Grismer of Livonia)."

Worlds collide when a young man (Joe Lannen of Livonia), whose business he has bought out, and the millionaire's wife (Dolores Shevlin of Farmington) arrive separately at the executive suite and meet his "new secretary."

"I got my just desserts," Caputo said.

This is the second dinner theater production Caputo has done recently. About a year ago, he starred as a young swinger, the Frank Sinatra movie role, in "Come Blow Your Horn" in Walled Lake.

IT'S PERHAPS not surprising that Caputo considers both of his roles ones in "morality plays." After all, he attended Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, on his way to becoming a priest, before he changed his mind about that vocation.

In the seminary, he got his first experience as a performer through a speech and drama class. "One of the great discoveries was that in acting I could do almost anything. That wasn't Vic up there. It was someone else," he said.

The plays were rewritten to get rid of the women characters, and he portrayed the King of Siam without Anna.

After Caputo left the seminary, he worked as an accountant for Cadillac. Someone told him he had a nice voice, and he found himself in Louisiana, working for a radio station where they didn't care how you sounded because it just paid \$50. At least, that's the way Caputo tells it.

Over a six-year period, he served in the Army two years as a radio-TV specialist, worked in Dayton, Ohio, and Grand Rapids and Garden City, where WBBB became WTAK (now WILD).

"All that early stuff in radio, I was a deejay. When the station changed its format, I became a talk host," he said.

He got into TV at WXYZ, where he spent 12½ years. Since coming to WJBK, Caputo has been a booth announcer, a street reporter, an anchor, and talk show host.

"I still jump into the news whenever a pope dies," (Continued on page 2D)



Vic Caputo makes a point, with good humor, during an interview about his morning TV show and nighttime "hobby" as an actor. (Staff photo by Stephen Cantrell)

TV host
Caputo
takes to
the stage