

Area musicians join jazz-festival lineup

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By James Windell
special writer

WHEN THE MONTREUX-Detroit Kool Jazz Festival IV opens Wednesday for its six-day life, more than 100 Detroit-area musicians will be rubbing musical shoulders with the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, Count Basie, Stan Getz, Freddie Hubbard, Abbey Lincoln and Ramsey Lewis.

This year the festival will feature 98 concerts, two film showings, two clinics and more than 200 jazz musicians gathered in Detroit to entertain hundreds of thousands of jazz fans. That this music can be heard in a dozen different places around the city adds to the inviting extravaganza.

The uniqueness of the festival is highlighted by the fact that it has never neglected the homegrown jazz artist.

Among local musicians performing for the crowds that will flock to the riverfront is mainstay Detroit jazz pianist Bess Bonnier. A fixture since the 1950s on the local jazz scene, Bonnier was pianist in the Jack Breakensha trio at the vibist's own club. She was a regular at the Vineyard, Charley's Crab, Top of the French and Baker's Keyboard Lounge.

SHE ALSO HAS been pianist-in-residence at the Detroit Institute of Arts' Sunday Afternoon Crystal Gallery for the last few years and for 27 months has been the regular pianist at the Summit in the Renaissance Center's Westin Hotel.

When Bonnier brings her trio to Hart Plaza for a concert on Saturday, Sept. 3, she will be playing music intended to appeal to a wide audience.

"I think that's important," she said, "because when thousands of people come to a jazz festival, they're not all going to be jazz aficionados."

For her, though, the joys of a moveable feast like the Montreux-Detroit Kool Jazz Festival have as

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— Art Tatum
jazz star

much to do with the atmosphere as with the music.

"The joy of having a festival is just the gathering, the feel of bringing people together and the elan of it all," Bonnier said. "It's a good, healthy thing for the city and it draws out a variety of people."

WHILE BONNIER has enjoyed a certain amount of local and national recognition, other area jazz musicians have been overlooked. Appearance in a prestigious jazz festival is an opportunity for the home-town musician. That's why this jazz festival is especially important, said Detroit jazz pianist James Tatum.

"It gives you greater exposure to people throughout the world," he said. The festival has international significance because of its association with the Montreux International Jazz Festival in Switzerland.

"It's fascinating and amazing to find people flying in from various parts of the country to witness the festival," Tatum said.

"That exposure helps to bridge the local musician with other avenues of performance in other parts of the country. By being able to say that you've played at the Montreux-Detroit festival, it gives you greater clout."

Guitarist Ron English, a Lansing native who has been a vital part of the Detroit music community for several years, said it's exposure which is most helpful to the local musician.

"IN TERMS OF sheer numbers," he said, "you could be playing for up to 10,000 people at one time. But

even more important, it's the opportunity to have your music examined in a context where people are there to hear good music performed by major jazz figures. And they hear you, too."

No local jazz musician will be heard at the festival unless he is invited by the festival. Bonnier recalls what that was like for her.

"I remember the first year 'I wasn't asked and I found it painful,' she said. 'But I think it's important to include all of the fine Detroit jazz musicians who frequently get overlooked.'"

"I wouldn't be offended now if I weren't asked next year, if a lesser-known musician got a chance to play, because it's a lovely accolade being asked."

James Tatum, director of Detroit's Murray Wright High School Fine Arts Department, as well as a leading jazz pianist, will be participating for his fourth time in the festival. Well known for bringing together jazz and religious music, Tatum and his Trio Plus will perform highlights from his "The Contemporary Jazz Mass" on Sunday, Sept. 4, at Hart Plaza.

"THERE'S A BRIDGE between the different aspects of spiritual music and the blues, particularly in the harmonic progressions of the chords," explained Tatum, who is a graduate of the University of Michigan's School of Music.

"When you listen to spiritual music in the minor key, there is a definite relation to the jazz character. Jazz expresses not only the happy mood but the suffering and agony as well. The minor key helps to bring out



James Tatum



Bess Bonnier



Ron English

those expressions of feeling."

Bonnier said that in her hour set she will spotlight a new treatment of Duke Ellington's "A Train." "It will be in what we call a free Latin feel," she said, "and musically, because of what we do with the chords, it will be a totally new treatment of the classic."

Ron English, leading a new six-member group, will open Saturday night, Sept. 3, at the Music Hall for Freddie Hubbard. English has a few things up his musical sleeve, too.

"We've got guitar, violin, vibes, drums, bass and percussion," he said, "and that allows us to get a nice, thick expressive line. It will be a very throaty, vocal kind of sound that will feature a massed harmonic support when we need it."

PLAYING ORIGINAL music which will concentrate on interesting textures and rhythms, English's group will include himself on electric guitar, Robert Allison on electric guitar, John Dana playing bass, Tom Starr on drums, Ashia Hill handling percussion and Marlene Rice on violin.

Associated with all forms of music in Detroit, English has taught at Oakland University's Jazz Studies Program, freelanced with the Fisher Theatre orchestra, appeared many times with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and played at most jazz clubs in the city.

He said he was pleasantly surprised to learn he was selected to open for trumpeter Hubbard.

"Freddie Hubbard sometimes takes a lot of flak for his creative and mood-setting dance rhythms," English said. "A lot of musicians

have been subjected to that kind of criticism since the 1950s.

"However, as a concert artist, Freddie's thing has always been very broad and he touches all bases. He's a sterling improviser and I'm pleased to know we are opening for him. I think our music will also set a strong mood and still keep an emphasis on improvisation."

WHILE TO SOME people jazz and musical considerations are the most vital aspects of a jazz festival, Bonnier sees it a bit differently.

"It's possible — just possible — that people with their prejudices will bump into one another and start talking and maybe find out that they have something to talk to each other about. And maybe they will find out that they like each other more than they think," she said.

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