

Jazz from page E1

For the first three years, the Jazzfest was in the red. While few disputed the merit of the event, it hadn't quite reached beyond the status of a three-day community concert in the park.

Then, two years ago a committee representing Birmingham's business, civic and cultural interests took another look at the annual event. "We got some business people involved, formed a steering committee, did some projections and made it fiscally responsible," said Bill Roberts, president of Roberts Restaurants, including 220 and Edison's in Birmingham.

To offset the deficit, additional sponsors were sought. And to boost sponsors' confidence, a more vigorous promotional campaign was undertaken.

In addition to backing from the Big Three — Chrysler, Ford and General Motors — sponsors include Meredith Magazines, Smooth Jazz 98.7 FM, Birmingham Principal Shopping District, Birmingham Restaurant Collection, AAA and The Observer and Eccentric Newspapers.

"We think (Jazzfest) could be bigger, but we're measuring that ambition with the town's interest," said Roberts. "While we're

all committed to making this a quality event, we know it all starts with quality musicians."

Step-lively lineup

Last year, given a modest \$15,000 budget, Al Skorpna was put in charge of arranging the talent lineup. He's proved to have a keen sense for upcoming jazz musicians. Last year's fest, which Skorpna billed, "Made in Michigan" because of the range of local talent, featured headline Gori Allen, who'll appear at this year's Montreux-Detroit Jazz Festival.

For next weekend's fest, Skorpna smartly used a \$25,000 budget to bring together a diverse, stylistic lineup, including Charlie Gabriel, the pulsating saxophone/Patti Richards, and the rhythm and blues of local favorite Bugs Beddow.

"The wide spectrum of artists speaks to the diversity of jazz, and the diversity of people who will come to Birmingham," said Dennis Tiny of Farmington Hills, co-director of Wayne State's jazz studies program.

Headliners include Kenny Garrett, voted alto saxophonist of the year by *Downbeat* in 1996; soulful saxophonist David

McMurray, whose funky jazz sound can be heard on recordings by the Rolling Stones, B.B. King, Bob Dylan, Iggy Pop and Was (Not Wash); Kevin Mahogany, who boasts a velvet-and-smoke baritone; and Willie and Lobo, a spicy stylistic violin and acoustic guitar duo recognized for their dramatic flair.

Along with these big-name international acts, the jazz fest features up-and-coming regional talent and an impressive offering of local musicians, including saxophonist Chris Collins, who'll perform out from his recently released CD, "A Time to Mourning Time to Dance." Collins recently returned from performances at the Glasgow Jazz Fest and Montreux-Switzerland.

Attendance estimates run as high as 7,000 per day. The optimism has already spawned discussions about bigger venues. "There aren't a lot of venues for jazz musicians around here," said Skorpna. "If we can offer a forum for these artists, then who knows what the Jazzfest could become."

Good for business

Dennis Brinker, president of the Restaurant Collection, a

group of 14 establishments in Birmingham, claims the Jazz Fest has a definite transformative influence.

"The streets are bustling with people, you can hear music everywhere you go and there's this cosmopolitan feel, like you're in San Francisco or New Orleans," he said. "This could not be a regional jazz fest but maybe a major event in the Midwest."

For that to occur, however, the jazz fest would have to expand uptown and to other parts of Birmingham, said Brinker. Considering that this year's Birmingham Art Fair extended to two sites, the growing popularity of shopping evenings and the Dream Cruise in August, Brinker's forecast may not be too far off.

But for now, space travelers should set their destination for one-week hence for the latest incarnation of Birmingham. Helicopters on Step lightly. Next landing: Planet Jazz.

While English will remain the spoken language, the newfound stride and attitude will be "step-lively cool." As in Jelly Roll, Bird, the Duke, Coltrane, Monk and Miles.

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new comes around. Then there's Guns 'N' Roses. When people were looking for the next Guns 'N' Roses, they found Nirvana."

The concert also features Social Distortion, The Mighty Mighty Bosstones, Descendents, Pennywise, Sick of It All, Blink 182, The Suicide Machines, Less Than Jake, Hopcat, Bouncing Soul, Real Gone, Big Fish, Limp Biskit, Lagwagon, Millencolin, Sugar Ray, Fat, H2O, Lo Presher, Sun Child, Detroiters The Suicide Machines, and a group of "extreme" athletes on three stages.

Local bands MOG, Twistin' Tarantulas, A.L.D., and Suburban Delinquents will perform on a stage sponsored by the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). Record labels are encouraged to bring a can of food to the main table and receive a specially stamped Pennywise sticker.

Getting its start

Royal Crown Revue was playing swing long before anyone thought about the genre's resurgence. Fledgling L.A. musicians vocalist Eddie Nichols, tenor saxman Mando Dorame, and guitarist James Achon founded the band in 1989.

"It started out as a rockabilly thing. Then Eddie got turned on to the swing deal and Mando came in and played sax. Boom, instantly that changed the sound," Steen said.

Soon after drummer/percussionist Daniel Glass, brassist saxist Bill Ungerman, banjoist Veikko Lepisto and Steen came aboard the band was playing about 200 gigs a year. Rent parties in San Francisco, snowboard kegers in Lake Tahoe, Chinatown punk clubs, and a heavy metal festival in Phoenix sounded just fine to Royal Crown.

"We just started playing rock clubs," Steen said of the early days of his band. "There were no swing bands at this time — not anywhere in the country. We were playing CBGB's, a heavy

metal festival in Phoenix, and basically started building this thing."

Royal Crown Revue started working on its debut "Mugzy's Move" soon after signing to Warner Bros. in the spring of 1995 with producer/A&R man Ted Templeman (Van Halen, Eric Clapton, Double Brothers). Prior to meeting Templeman, A&R people from other labels were eager to sign the band but weren't sure how to market the band and frankly were afraid of being fired if swing didn't catch on.

"Ted came to town and if anyone had the power to be able to make the leap and sign us, it was him. He really believed in the band. He got Lee Hirschberg who worked on Count Basie and Frank Sinatra (albums) to engineer it. It was a great team," Steen said.

"Mugzy's Move," which features the Royal Crown-written "Hey Pachucos," as well as the Bobby Darin classic "Beyond the Sea," and Willie Dixon's "I Love The Life I Live," lends life — and some fun — to the music scene and offers some help for those who are a little shy about approaching potential dates at clubs.

"OK, it's high energy, it's upbeat and it's fun. But as far as the (swing) dancing goes, you can meet someone and hang out. Instantly you break the ice because you're touching each other. With other music, you're dancing, doing your own space thing. But here you're instantly interacting and doing something together."

By playing the Warped Tour, Royal Crown Revue gets the chance to share that passion with thousands of people a night. "We're young and the crowds we want to play for are young. It's great to see they're enjoying an older style of American music that virtually has been forgotten about," Steen said.

"Swing has always been around. Count Basie's band is still around. Jimmy Dorsey's band is still around. But they're playing to older folks or jazz aficionados. Here we found a way to bridge the gap and play to kids who are listening to Green Day or Social Distortion."

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and playing sideman for the Mel Lewis Orchestra, Dannie Richmond, Freddie Hubbard, Woody Shaw and Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers before landing a spot on Miles Davis' last band.

"Coming from Art Blakey to Miles was a change," Garrett said. "With Blakey he only allowed you to take two choruses and it taught me to play, make a statement, in a short time. Miles, he allowed me more time. Both were valuable, one was 'get to the point' and the other was 'write a novel.' Both allowed me to make a statement in different ways."

Davis also taught Garrett about being a band leader.

"Miles was like a cook, he took all the different ingredients and

put them together," Garrett said. Davis combined rhythm & blues players, pop players and jazz players to get the particular sound he wanted.

"He knew how to get what he wanted out of you, and that's what I try to do with my group," Garrett said.

Garrett's group features Kenny Kirkland on piano, Nat Reeves on bass and Jeff "Tain" Watts on drums.

Garrett has led several groups over the years and first recorded "Introducing Kenny Garrett" on Criss Cross in 1984. Last year's Warner Bros. album was a tribute to another sax player "Fusion: The Music of John Coltrane." He has built a reputa-

tion as a strong, propulsive, blues oriented and accessible player with a talent for improvising.

The group's new release "Songbook" (Warner Bros.) is the first to feature all Garrett compositions.

"Most are inspired by life experiences. I might hear a theme or a melody. Songs are developed so many different ways," Garrett said. "Like 'Before It's Time to Say Goodbye.' I wanted to write something for Miles and I came up with the title before I wrote the music. As you go along, you have different experiences."

Garrett said even as the band was preparing to perform in London, he was busy sketching new compositions in a sketch-

book he always keeps with him. As the band plays, the compositions change and develop.

"If you allow musicians to be themselves, there'll be changes. It's improvising music. If you're listening to the music, it's always shifting," he said.

Garrett calls his band "a good unit and I want to hold on to them as long as possible. I believe you have to cherish it while you can."

Garrett is looking forward to his Birmingham gig.

"Hey, it's hometown, so we come to show off when we get there," Garrett said with a laugh. "We come to share what we're doing. Basically though, we're coming to have some fun."

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Women fess-up in 'Coffeehouse Confessions'

BY SUSAN B. TAUBER
STAFF WRITER

"Coffeehouse Confessions" an original, one-act play written by Sue Skibicki of Livonia, takes place in a coffeehouse where 11 women of varying ages, types, and sanity levels "confess" their innermost thoughts to the audience.

"Coffeehouse Confessions" is a fund-raising event for Ridgedale Players, a non-profit theater group founded in 1933. The play will be presented 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, July 18-19. Tickets are \$10 a person and include coffee, refreshments, and a chance to meet the playwright and actresses after the show. The Ridgedale Players playhouse is at 205 West Long Lake Road, Troy, Cal. (248) 988-7049 for tickets.

"I started writing this play about a year ago," said Skibicki.

"I've kept a journal since I was in college, and the characters are little bits and pieces of me and my best friend."

"This is a show everyone can see," Skibicki said. "There's no objectionable language, and it doesn't have any male-bashing. The characters in it are all kind of interesting."

Annette See of Troy portrays a harried housewife who volunteers for everything. She also spends a lot of time in the car driving her three children to their numerous activities.

"I was a harried mom and I only raised one child," said See, whose husband, Dan and grown daughter, Tiffany, also are Ridgedale Players members. "This is a play I wanted to be a part of. I've been in several of Sue's productions before and I've worked with her before. I was very touched by the heartfelt women's items she's bringing out

that a lot of us have been touched with." See's character wears pajamas, a housecoat and two different shoes, not her normal work attire. She's a kindergarten and first grade teacher of gifted children at The Roeper School in Bloomfield Hills.

Skibicki's characters in "Coffeehouse Confessions," also are humorous, witty, dramatic and tragic.

Also in the play are Troy residents Kathryn Jensen, Lori Jacobs, Madonna Holden and Becky MacIntyre; Suzanne Barcovic of West Bloomfield, and Maureen Cook of Birmingham.

They portray such characters as the belligerent, mystical bag lady; the middle-aged woman who has tried every diet, the woman who lives with 37 cats, an avid actress and others.

Dawn Hooper of Royal Oak is the producer.

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