

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Ask Polyrhythms' Nate Lawrence about the highlights of more than two years presenting the Third Sunday jazz series at the River Music Experience, and his response tells you a great deal about his goals.

"Lenora Helm put together a choir real quick, out of the kids, and they're doing 'Ain't Misbehavin','" he recalled last week. "Ray Blue, he had a six-piece with percussionists and whatnot, and as soon as the workshop was over, the kids just bum-rushed the stage. They sat at the piano. Some of the kids just grabbed the mic and started singing. Some kids went to the congas and started playing. The drummer got up, the kids sat down. It's hands-on. Those are the high points."

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Lawrence has been presenting the Third Sunday series, which will feature singer Lois Deloatch this weekend (see ["Lois Deloatch: Another Instrument"](#) in this week's *River Cities' Reader*), since the summer of 2006. Each event features an afternoon workshop and an evening performance, and it's evident that the educational component is critical to Lawrence. "If we don't cultivate a next generation," he said, "then whatever we're talking about is just going to fade away."

Ernest Dawkins, a saxophonist and the series' featured performer in August, said that workshops give the events "longevity" and "sustainability."

"How you get children involved is you make them participate, either through song, rhythmic exercises, or dance performance - something that gets them engaged," he said.

The lesson is that "jazz is not ... something that's disconnected from them," Dawkins added. "Jazz or creative improvisation is a music that's relevant to them and has a history as it relates to the music that they relate to," such as hip hop and R&B.

Lawrence emphasized that the workshops are geared toward people with any level of expertise in music. "We don't do master classes," he said. "We do *workshops*."

And education is also an essential component of performer selection. "There are a lot of people that can come and play all day," Lawrence said, "but they just don't know how to tell anybody about it."

Lawrence and his frequent collaborator, Shellie Moore Guy, have for more than a decade presented neighborhood cultural events such as Blues in the Hood, book discussions, the Jazz & Blues Restoration Project (which aims to teach about the relationship between the two genres), and Kwanzaa celebrations. That variety is a reflection of the Polyrhythms name, which Lawrence defined as "taking several different rhythms that are compatible and

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making a sound that's harmonious. Polyrythms really kind of sums up who we are."

The Third Sunday series is notable for its focus on the entire Quad Cities - "What was good for our neighborhoods was good for the whole community," Lawrence said - and for its relative permanence.



The initial batch of four Third Sunday events - funded by the Vickie Anne Palmer Foundation - ran from April through July 2006, featuring Willie Pickens, Semanya McCord, Bill Bell, and Ari Brown.

"Once we did those, we knew we could do the rest," Lawrence said. "It was like a trial run."

After Polyrythms secured funding of its own - most notably from the Riverboat Development Authority - the series resumed in January 2007 and has, except for this past April, been a staple of the Redstone Room's monthly schedule. That's more than two years' worth of monthly performances and workshops.

Third Sunday started off focusing on trios, Lawrence said: "We were interested in focusing on rhythm. A trio ... that's the rhythm section."

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But it has since expanded, in part because of the tastes of the audience, he said.

"You start off thinking what you like," Lawrence said. "You also have to factor in, more importantly, what your audience likes. ... Our audience is more chained to the melody."

Third Sunday workshops average 30 people, he said, while concerts generally draw audiences of between 75 and 100 people. Lawrence said that only about 40 percent of the program's costs are covered by concert and workshop admissions.

The performers that Lawrence brings in might not be household names, but they're respected artists. "We've had good musicians, but we haven't had the most known musicians," he said. "We've had the musicians that all the known musicians want to play with when they come to town, but we really need to kick it up a bit."

The barrier there is money, Lawrence said, because he certainly has the connections. His cousin is jazz historian Donald Meade, and Lawrence recalled annual birthday parties for Oscar Peterson, at which he was introduced to luminaries such as Ella Fitzgerald, Ray Brown, and Dizzy Gillespie. Meade introduced Lawrence to Deloatch and Helm, for example.

"A lot of the people I know, and those that I don't know, if I drop his name ... ," Lawrence said.

And although there are many organizations that expose children to the arts, there's little jazz education in the Quad Cities.

And, Lawrence said, "there can never be too many of us, particularly when it comes to the kids."

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For more information about Polyrythms' "Third Sunday" jazz series, visit Polyrythms.org/thirdsundays.htm