

Jazz Festival Mounts Strong Field

Written by Jeff Ignatius
Tuesday, 15 May 2001 18:00

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Probably the smartest thing the organizers of the Eighth Annual Quad Cities Jazz Fest can do is leave Jim Widner to his own devices. Widner, the musical director of the festival and leader of the St. Louis-based big band that bears his name, has parlayed the annual event's growing reputation into a stellar field for the 2001 edition, which includes events Thursday through Saturday.

"They give me pretty much a free hand at crafting the artist lineup," Widner said of the festival's organizers.

"He has contacts that our committee ... no way," said John Scally, a member of the Quad Cities Jazz Fest committee. "He's been a godsend. He has saved our bacon."

Widner has been involved with the festival for half a decade, and he says his knowledge of the market has proved useful. He tries to maintain a balance between popularity and quality while keeping in mind that the tastes of the Quad Cities audience are more likely Midwestern than avant-garde.

"We don't *hip* ourselves out of business," he said.

This year's lineup will feature plenty of familiar faces, even for people who aren't jazz aficionados. If you've seen either Blues Brothers movie, *Saturday Night Live*, or David Letterman's show, you've seen some of this weekend's lineup.

Singer Mardra Thomas, pianist Reggie Thomas, bassist Widner, horn player Tom "Bones" Malone, trumpeter Randy Brecker, saxophonist "Blue" Lou Marini, drummer Charles Braugham, and the Southern Illinois University Big Band are all scheduled to participate. Hoagy Bix Carmichael Jr., the son of the jazz-piano and composing great who was named after Davenport's own jazz hero, will serve as master of ceremonies.

The festival gets underway on Thursday, May 17, with "Jazz in the Neighborhood for Kids" at the Col Ballroom in Davenport from 5 to 7 p.m. This event was added last year and is intended

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to teach grade-school and junior-high students “what this language called jazz is all about,” Widner said. The event is free and will feature many of the festival artists, plus the Bix Beiderbecke Youth Jazz Band.

The public face of the festival shows itself Friday night with “The Concert,” featuring all the festival’s artists at Augustana College’s Centennial Hall. Tickets for the 7 p.m. show are \$20 and available only at the door.

While the performers won’t be sharing the stage at the same time, Widner said they will appear separately and in different combinations. Many of the artists have worked together and are therefore already familiar with each other. But one of the great things about jazz is that everybody already knows the grammar and vocabulary; even complete strangers can improvise together. “You can get together and everybody knows what to do,” Widner said.

Saturday brings “The Clinic” at West Music at 5202 North Brady Street, running from 11 a.m. to noon and featuring many of the jazz-festival participants.

On Saturday evening, many of the featured musicians will close the festival with “Jazz at Abbey Station,” an opportunity to watch the performers show their chops in a more intimate atmosphere. Tickets are \$20, and the 7 p.m. event also features hors d’oeuvres and a cash bar.

Widner said he has to work to ensure a mix of new artists and Quad Cities Jazz Fest veterans. While patrons don’t want to hear the same lineup year after year, they also want some performers they’ve enjoyed at previous editions.

St. Louis’ Mardra and Reggie Thomas fit into the “familiar faces” category. “Reggie and Mardra have developed quite a following up there [in the Quad Cities], and if I didn’t bring them, I’d have a riot on my hands,” Widner said. The husband and wife duo have recorded one album together, *Fade to Blue* from 1999, but also work extensively apart.

Familiar faces of a different sort include Tom “Bones” Malone and “Blue” Lou Marini, both of whom have played an integral role in the Blues Brothers phenomenon. While at *Saturday Night Live*, Malone helped John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd develop their famous skit and appeared in both the classic original movie and its sequel, *Blues Brothers 2000*. (Malone should also look familiar to fans of *The Late Show with David Letterman*, where he performs with Paul Shaffer’s crack band.)

Marini also has a *Saturday Night Live* pedigree, gracing the show with opening and closing sax solos from 1976 to 1983, and was a featured performer in both Blues Brothers movies. In addition to his great jazz background, he’s worked with artists as diverse as the Rolling Stones; Dr. John; Blood, Sweat, & Tears; and The Band. He’s currently preparing for a summer tour with Paul Simon.

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Randy Brecker has built a résumé to match just about anybody in the jazz field. He and his brother Michael garnered a total of seven Grammy nominations as the Brecker Brothers, and he's also work with an impressive list of artists, from the soulful slow sounds of James Taylor to the funk of Parliament-Funkadelic to the brainy outsider rock of Frank Zappa. He was a major player in jazz-rock fusion and isn't afraid of new genres; his new album, *Hangin' in the City*, features all new funk, hip-hop, and jazz compositions.

Such a stable of talent wouldn't come without Widner, known not just for his musicianship but also for his organizing skills. "He does festivals worldwide," Scally said. "He does clinics worldwide."

Widner said he is drawn to the Quad Cities festival partially because of its format, with educational components and performances in settings both large and small.

He said he hopes that the quality of the performers keeps audiences coming back. "The community needs to understand how lucky they are," he said. "To keep this thing not only continuing but growing ... is to keep supporting it. This is a world-class festival."

For more information about the "Jazz in the Neighborhood for Kids" event, contact Ida Johnson at United Neighbors, 322-7363. For more information about "The Clinic," contact Todd Hruska at 388-1519.