

Darcy Hepner gets the big band back together

Wed., Feb 17, 2016 | By Leonard Turnevicius



DARCY HEPNER | Jimmy Katz, Special to the Spectator

Coming up with a set list for a jazz gig can be an agony beyond compare. Just ask Mohawk College music prof Darcy Hepner, who reignites his Darcy Hepner Jazz Orchestra Thursday night at The GasWorks.

"I put a lot of thought into our sets. I can agonize for days," admitted Hepner to The Spectator. "I look over 70 to 80 gigs, and that's two sets often (per gig). That's 150 set lists. And sometimes I think, 'Why don't I just go back and look at one of those set lists and just use it?' And then I look at it, and it just doesn't feel right. It seems like everything has to be bespoke."

When the DHJO debuted at The Corktown Pub some eight years ago, the band's book was made up of charts by Thad Jones. Little wonder then that with pretty much the original DHJO lineup intact, Hepner is inclined to include a lot of Thad in Thursday night's sets.

"I really feel that I just want to go back to the roots of the band where we were playing great jazz, and swinging like crazy, and everybody was having fun," said Hepner. "But it's not just about the music. There's a spectacle to it that's fun to watch. And the musicians always inspire each other. I like being the facilitator. And I suppose that's what it is about the set list."

"You know, just looking at the flow of it and how it feels and whether as much as I want to play this tune will it fit with the other ones that I've got up there. Sometimes over three days I'll look at it (the

set list), and I'll labour over it, and then I'll email it to some friends which is really ridiculous because I've done it before where I've sat down in a hurry and written it out, and it's just fine. That's the nature of it."

It's quite likely that the curtain raiser will be Thad's chart of the 1931 Simons-Marks hit, "All of Me," which was included on the DHJO's 2010 release, "Blues in Another Minute."

"It's really a fun, quirky arrangement that ends in a way that you'd almost expect, you know, all of The Rockettes to come across the stage," said Hepner. "The music is as much fun to play as it is to listen to. Thad was really into the blues and swinging. It's not that kind of jazz that, you know, it's hard to play, and it sounds hard to play, and it sounds weird. It's hard to play in a way that intrigues musicians which is actually the reason that we started using that music at the beginning with the band."

But if Hepner can swing it, there'll be more than just Thad in tonight's book. Late last week, Hepner was halfway through inputting Kenny Wheeler's "Gentle Piece" into his Sibelius 8 music notation program, which when completed, would generate the sheet music for each band member. Hepner had come across that chart while rummaging through some boxes at his mom's home out west. That chart had been given to Hepner some 20 years ago by Kenny himself.

Compared to Thad, Kenny, who incidentally appeared with vocalist Norma Winstone and the Dave McMurdo Jazz Orchestra at Mohawk College in 2004, is an altogether different colour in the jazz spectrum.

"I would say that Kenny, in spite of the fact that he's from St. Catharines originally, his music really reflects a European sensibility," said Hepner of Wheeler, who both played on Andy Middleton's 2002 release "Reinventing the World." "You don't hear the blues in it, let's put it that way. I think he represents a European tradition of jazz in a beautiful way."

The wordless vocalize in Kenny's wistful "Gentle Piece" is to be sung by Sophia Perlman who Hepner describes as "the only singer the band will ever need."

Hepner is planning to feature Perlman in Bob Mintzer's lovely arrangement of the Young-Washington standard, "My Foolish Heart," in the first set which is slated to begin around 8 p.m. Expect to hear more from Perlman in the second set, loosely scheduled for 9:30 p.m.

Keeping in the jazz vein, the Hamilton-based trio of Shields Johnston Fielding (guitarist Bob Shields, bassist Clark Johnston, and drummer Adam Fielding, all of whom have connections with Mohawk College's music program) recorded their latest album, "Pictures," in Toronto last summer following their tour out west. It is now available online at cddbaby.com/cd/shieldsjohnstonfielding.

Friday, Feb. 19, is the deadline for applications to the 2016 Ontario Youth Choir which runs from August 12 to 21. Check out www.choirsontario.org for details.

Leonard Turnevicius writes on classical music for The Hamilton Spectator.
leonardturnevicius@gmail.com

More Information

Darcy Hepner

What: Darcy Hepner Jazz Orchestra

When: Thursday, Feb. 18 at 8 p.m.

Where: The GasWorks, 141 Park St. N.

Cost: \$35, student \$25

Info: aninstrumentforeverychild.ca