

Saxophonist kicks off series

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Saxophonist Darcy Heppner is coming to Ancaster's Old Firehall Arts Centre in Ancaster for the first installment of Rhythm and Blues and More. Darcy Heppner



Darcy Heppner is the first performer in the Rhythm and Blues and More series.

By Mike Pearson, News staff

Growing up in Hamilton, Darcy Heppner loved the music of Chicago, Tower of Power and Blood Sweat and Tears. It was rock and roll music with a twist of rhythm and blues, accented by a powerful horn section.

As a young musician from a family of musicians, Heppner played the cello with the Hamilton Philharmonic Youth Orchestra. As a pastime, he played guitar in a Blood, Sweat and Tears cover band. After trying his hand at arranging, Heppner saw the band's saxophone player struggle with the music. He made the transition from guitar to saxophone and instantly fell in love with the instrument.

While studying music at McMaster University, Heppner first majored in cello. He intended to switch to a saxophone major, but was told the saxophone wasn't a legitimate instrument. Maurice Ravel's Bolero and Modest Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition includes saxophone arrangements, but the instrument did not exist during the time of Mozart, Haydn and Bach, a reality that has somewhat limited the saxophone's role in classical music.

Undeterred, Heppner excelled as a flute major. He returned to the sax and ventured to Miami University where he earned a Master's degree in jazz.

As a young musician still looking to make his mark, Hepner got a big break. He was selected to perform on a televised musical showcase with the likes of B.B. King, Aretha Franklin, Henry Mancini, Helen Reddy and many others. One of the highlights was playing alongside Franklin, as she belted out her signature Motown hit, Respect. The series was called The Palace Presents, and Hepner was initially invited to perform as a substitute saxophonist for the 1979 season at Hamilton Place. Following the show's debut, he was welcomed back for the 1980 season.

"I got to play with B.B., Aretha and a bunch of my heroes," Hepner recalled.

Beginning in the mid-1980s, Hepner began teaching full-time at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. He was later the founding department head of the Selkirk College Music Program in Nelson, B.C.

When his wife, Astrid, landed her dream job as International Marketing and Media Manager for BMG Classics, the couple moved to New York. Hepner worked towards his PHD at New York University and began looking for work as a saxophonist. He also released his first self-titled debut as a leader in 1997 on Water Street Music.

After playing on the Rolling Stones' 1997 Steel Wheels tour, another opportunity was headed Hepner's way.

Blood, Sweat and Tears saxophonist Tom Timko was looking to take a break, and Hepner was identified as a potential replacement. A fill-in role would become permanent by 1999, and Hepner stayed with the band as a regular member until 2004.

A grueling tour schedule carried Hepner and his band mates across North America. On a travel day, Hepner would commonly set his alarm clock for 3:30 a.m. to prepare for an early flight. During peak touring season, those early mornings were as frequent as two or three times per week, which wasn't a necessarily a problem.

The birth of his daughter, Camilla, changed everything.

"I was missing a lot and I didn't want to do that," Hepner said.

Hoping to settle down, Hepner and his family moved back to Hamilton to balance both their personal and professional lives. Astrid, also a jazz saxophonist, founded the Hamilton Music Collective. Through its motto, An Instrument for Every Child, the collective strives to offer every Hamilton elementary student the opportunity to learn to play an instrument.

Today Hepner is coordinator for applied music at Mohawk College, teaching skills such as ear training, arranging and ensemble performance. He formed the Darcy Hepner Jazz Orchestra in 2008, a 16-piece all-star ensemble. The group's debut recording, Blues in Another Minute, was released during the summer of 2010.

He continues to perform in small club venues, such as the Iris Restaurant in Buffalo, NY and Hamilton's This Ain't Hollywood. He also frequently accompanies Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons, whenever the group is in town.

With a career spanning more than 30 years, Hepner knows a professional musician needs to make his own luck to be successful. But he considers himself fortunate to have performed with some of the greatest legends in music, including his boyhood idols.

“I do consider myself lucky to have played with those people,” said Hepner. “It’s a lot harder (for younger performers) to get those opportunities.”

At his upcoming performance at Ancaster’s Old Firehall Arts Centre, Hepner will return to his R & B and jazz roots on Oct. 13 at 8 p.m. for the first installment of Rhythm and Blues and More in the village.

He plans to perform selections such as Buddy Miles’ Them Changes, an Ode to Billy Joel, Al Green’s Let’s Get Together, How Sweet It Is (a song made famous by James Taylor), and Josie by Steely Dan to name only a few.

Rhythm and Blues and More is a partnership between Music at Fieldcote, Fieldcote Memorial Park and Museum and the Hamilton All-Star Jazz Band. The Old Firehall Arts Centre features an intimate setting with soft lighting and cabaret-style table seating. Tickets are limited for all performances.

Tickets are \$20 for each of the four concerts and are available at Cavallo Nero restaurant at 370 Wilson St. E., 905-648-8888 or online at www.hamiltonallstarjazz.org.

Other performers in the series include Chris Gale, Backroom 11, Jack de Keyzer and Tyler Yarema.