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Monterey Jazz Festival's free Next Generation Festival features top high school-age jazz musicians and more

By BETH PEERLESS

Herald Correspondent

Posted: 04/08/2010 01:50:49 AM PDT

Updated: 04/08/2010 09:32:16 AM PDT

With each passing year over the last 40 years, the Monterey Jazz Festival has stayed true to its mission of educating young people about the art of jazz music.

Whether it's through the festival's yearlong educational programs or with the annual spring event called the Next Generation Festival, the nonprofit jazz organization and producer of the legendary Monterey Jazz Festival takes its job seriously.

Now in its sixth year under the current moniker, bestowed upon the previously titled Monterey Jazz Festival High School Jazz Competition, the youth music competition has grown yet again in its breadth and scope. This year's event takes place Friday through Sunday at several locations, including the Monterey Plaza Hotel, Fisherman's Wharf and Cannery Row.

Youths from all over the nation continue to come in ever-increasing numbers to Monterey to compete in a plethora of categories where they can learn, grow and exercise their talents in a totally supportive environment.

It truly is amazing how much has been accomplished since the program's inception, and especially since Dr. Rob Klevan assumed the position of education director.

He's brought the event to its current shiny megaton bang-for-the-buck fun and enlightenment for the music students and a great experience for the local community that can come hear the future of jazz for free. That's right. Zilch, nada, not even a penny.

But you can contribute if you'd like at the donation station set up

at the event.

Try these numbers and stats on for size. More than 2,000 students will participate, coming from 13 states, which represents more than double the amount of represented states from 2009.

There will be 63 groups competing for a number of performance slots at the 53rd Monterey Jazz Festival, the largest selection of groups from the widest variety of states to come to Monterey in the 40-year history of the event.

Some groups come just to have the chance to perform at the event, without taking part in any competition.

California schools are represented from 13 counties, and special guest groups are coming from New Jersey, Montana, Illinois, Kansas and Texas.

"I was very impressed with the number of applicants we had this year as it showed a nearly 30percent increase in applications over the past year," said Klevan. "We also had 20 states and two countries represented in the auditions. I think it shows how popular this event is becoming, and therefore, how much more competitive it is to be selected to participate. The ensembles selected for the 2010 Next Generation Festival are truly the best of the best."

A draw for both students and the community are the big-name jazz stars acting as judges and educators.

This year's Monterey Jazz Festival Artist-in-Residence is four-time Grammy winner Dianne Reeves, considered to be jazz music's preeminent vocalist.

In addition to working with a string of top jazz instrumentalists, Reeves has recorded and performed extensively with Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, was a featured soloist with Sir Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic, and performed at the closing ceremonies of the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, Utah.

Her duties at this weekend's event begin with a performance at the Friday night "kick-off" concert, featuring a band made up of the event's judges. She will also present a Vocal Soloist Workshop Saturday at 11 a.m. in the Serra Ballroom of the Conference Center.

The concert Friday night begins at 8p.m. and is held in the Serra Ballroom. Judges who will perform include drummer Terri Lyne Carrington, tenor saxophonists Billy Harper and Paul Contos, pianist Alan Pasqua, bassist Ray Drummond, trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, guitarist Corey Christiansen, alto saxophonist Mary Fetting, baritone saxophonist Aaron Lington, trombonist Andy Martin, and vocalists Michele Weir, Mat Falck and Jennifer Barnes.


Judges George Stone and Larry Sutherland are not performing, but are involved in the course of the competition.

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A bass player from Buchanan High School performed at last... (COLE THOMPSON/Monterey Jazz Festival)

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Saturday's events include competitions in the high school big band, combo and vocal ensemble, as well as the open combo division competition. Sunday features college big band, college vocal jazz ensemble and conglomerate big band competitions, as well as several middle school big band performances and special guest performances.

Auditions for the Next Generation Jazz Orchestra and the Berklee/Jimmy Lyons Scholarship also take place both days. A composition category is judged apart from the event.

The Nadia Washington Quartet from Boston's Berklee College of Music, will also perform all weekend at the festival.

The activities are nonstop, with jam sessions and performances by bands that have already competed in the less-demanding context of stages set up on Cannery Row and Fisherman's Wharf. The full schedule of performances is at www.montereyjazzfestival.org.

For most of the youth competition's history, the focus has been on high school groups, but since the switch to the Next Generation Jazz Festival format downtown, there has been a continued eye on including college-age musicians, middle school students, and young musicians who go beyond the standard school format and are in a category of their own.

One such musician coming to Monterey this year and competing in the new for 2010 Open Combo division is 16-year-old San Diego pianist and composer Chase Morrin.

His exceptional talent is illuminated in this excerpt from an article written by San Diego Union-Tribune writer George Vargas:

"Challenges are nothing new for this precocious musician, who has already earned enough awards and honors to fill a wall or two. He is definitely an extremely gifted young pianist, which is why we gave him merit scholarships the past two years," said Daniel Atkinson, the founder of the annual UCSD Jazz Camp and the La Jolla Athenaeum Music & Arts Library's jazz program coordinator.

Veteran San Diego musician Ira B. Liss, who has led his Big Band Jazz Machine for the past 31 years, is even more effusive.

"Chase is just amazing and very mature, musically," he said of Morrin, who joined Liss' 18-piece big band about six months ago. "The median age of my band members is 35, so having a 16-year-old in the group is very unusual. But there are very few 16-year-olds that play like him."

Morrin's love of music began when he was 9 and his parents bought him a small electric keyboard from Costco. Jazz became an all-consuming passion after his Russian-born piano teacher, Svetlana Pikous, gave him a Ray Charles songbook.

Morrin, who had already started composing his own songs, was barely 12 when he was named Musician of the Year by the Carmel Valley (San Diego County) branch of the Boy's & Girl's Club. The same year he wrote "Free Fall," a jazz-funk piece inspired by Bach.

"I learned a lot about jazz by going on YouTube," he said. "I'd type in 'Ray Charles' and there'd be links to (jazz piano giants) Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson. Or I'd be listening to (jazz radio station) KSDS-FM and hear some awesome pianist, like Chick Corea. Then, I'd buy their albums and learn their stuff."

Morrin has learned his lessons well. One of his latest compositions, "Angular Raga," deftly mixes constantly shifting meters and syncopation with a Thelonious Monk-tinged chordal pattern and fleet bop-tinged lines. The piece, which was partly inspired by his growing interest in Indian classical music, recently earned Morrin the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) Young Jazz Composer Award for 2010.

Morrin performs with his trio Saturday evening as part of the Open Combo Competition held 5:30 to 8:30p.m. in the Steinbeck Forum of the Monterey Conference Center.

Perhaps he'll be joining the list of illustrious alumni of this event, such as saxophonists Joshua Redman, Dave Koz and Dave Ellis, pianists Patrice Rushen and Benny Green, multi-instrumentalist Peter Apfelbaum and bassist Larry Grenadier.

Beth Peerless can be reached at peerless@mbay.net. GO!

JAZZ FESTIVAL

•What: Monterey Jazz festival presents the Next Generation Festival

•Where: Monterey Conference Center, 1 Portola Plaza, Monterey; events also on Cannery Row and Fisherman's Wharf

•When: Friday, April 9 through Sunday, April 11; opening concert at 8p.m. Friday at the Conference Center

•Tickets: Free

•Information: montereyjazzfestival.org and 373-3366

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