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All that jazz

by: [Kari Hastings](#) - 08/11/04

Mt. Hood Jazz Festival-goers basked in the glow of legendary musicians over the weekend while soaking up sunrays and spritzing themselves with water bottles to keep cool.

"Both evenings you've had masters right in front of you, what more can you ask for?" said Nancy Johnson-Curran, who has attended all 23 of Gresham's jazz festivals.

The Beaverton resident said she was particularly "spellbound" by Frank Morgan, an alto saxophone player who dazzled the crowd at Main City Park on Sunday, Aug. 8. Morgan sat regally in purple linen garments on a simple chair with no sheet music and performed with pianist Cyrus Chestnut.

"It's all in the heart," Johnson-Curran said of Morgan's playing. "He breathes it."

The duo's silky duets smoothed over the jazz fans like a lovely balm to the day's heat — temperatures reached into the upper 90s, and shade was scarce save for the umbrellas over the food area's tables.

Straw hats and sunglasses were the headwear of choice, but festival organizers said they didn't think the heat hindered attendance too badly, although more people came on Saturday, Aug. 7.

Mary McSwain, president of the Mt. Hood Jazz Association, said early estimates suggest attendance held steady to last year's numbers, which were about 4,000, counting both days. McSwain said it will likely be several days before hard numbers are available from TicketMaster.

For the first 20 years, the festival was held on the Mt. Hood Community College's campus and attracted crowds of 30,000 over three days. During its heyday in the late '80s and early '90s, the festival drew jazz greats like Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Stan Getz and Doc Severinsen.

In 2002, the Mt. Hood Festival of Jazz Foundation dissolved under a pile of more than \$200,000 in debt. With only a few months to scramble together a festival, the Gresham/Mt. Hood Jazz Association formed and put on a two-day festival in Main City Park. About 1,800 people bought tickets in 2002, a number that pleased the association, who at the time said 700 tickets would need to be sold to break even.

McSwain said it's too early to think about next year, but the jazz festival will most likely return in 2005.



Photos by Vern Uyetake

Trumpet player Marcus Belgrave was a welcome last-minute replacement for Los Hombres Calientes on Saturday, Aug. 7, at the Mt. Hood Jazz Festival.

This year, the festival stuck to a similar format as last year's event with student bands opening the show both days around noon, including the Mt. Hood Community College jazz band and an all-star high school band.

Zach Poelwijk tickled the ivories for the East County All-Star Band. The Barlow High School graduate is heading to the University of Oregon this fall as a jazz piano major and called his experience playing alongside 3 Tenors sax player David Evans "amazing."

Poelwijk said he's been playing the piano "since he was born" and studied classical piano until he entered high school. But once he discovered jazz piano and the world of improvisation, he never looked back.

Jonathan Krieger and Linda Hull, friends who both had children in the all-star band, stood close to the stage so they could take snapshots and video footage. Krieger said he gave his son a bass for Christmas five years ago and Jonathan Krieger taught himself how to play.

Gresham resident Sam Murray said the student bands were a highlight for her.

"It's so important that we include them in this," she said. "The arts are everything. They were very entertaining."

The festival's headliner, Abbey Lincoln, inspired standing ovations more than once, especially in response to a rousing rendition of "Whatcha Gonna Do?"

Lincoln, who turned 74 on Friday, was a commanding presence onstage, despite her slight frame. In a dramatic wide-brimmed black hat, flowing black clothing and swinging braids, Lincoln delivered nearly two hours of music. The audience soaked up her mostly self-written songs infused with flair and joy. She often lit up with an infectious grin.

She told the crowd that writing songs "keeps me from losing my mind and lying on a psychiatrist's couch. That's the truth." She also said it isn't the first time she's been to Oregon. "It makes me happy to remember that the second job I had on stage was in Roseburg, Oregon," she said. "To be back ... it's sweet."

While listeners were clearly delighted with Lincoln's performance, some lamented that more didn't turn out to see her and others perform.

"This place should have been packed," Johnson-Curran said. Even still, Johnson-Curran said she thinks festival organizers are doing an "absolutely wonderful job. We're kind of getting back to what it was."

Los Hombres Calientes was another crowd favorite. Bill Summers and his band, including last-minute trumpet replacement Marcus Belgrave, flew in from a gig in New Orleans to bring its unique blend of Latin, blues, Caribbean, African and jazz music to Gresham.

Lucille Sheets of Portland came to the festival primarily to see the tribute to singer Marianne Mayfield, a cornerstone of the Portland jazz scene in the 1970s and '80s who is battling liver cancer. Portland's Ron Steen, of the Ron Steen Trio, organized the event.

Sheets brought her husband, daughter and grandson to the event so she could see Mayfield, whom she used to teach fifth-grade with at Jason Lee Elementary School in Northeast Portland. Sheets daughter, Donna Sheets-Mathew, said Ron Steen played at her wedding.

Kevin LeCroy, a carpenter who lives in Gresham, said he was 15th in line for this year's festival, earning the distinction by waiting in line for several hours before the gates

opened on Saturday. A festival veteran, LeCroy said he hasn't missed a single one. He attended at MHCC and went to the very first festival in 1982 at age 28.

"Oh yeah, I would spend nights in line in the past," he said. "I've been first in the gates, second, third. ... Then it was party time; now it's more tradition."

LeCroy said he appreciates the smaller, more intimate format of the festival.

"Before you had all the people who were in the "A" section, and now we're all together. There's no separation," he said.

Another crowd favorite was singer/guitarist Madeleine Peyroux of Brooklyn, N.Y. Draped in shades of blue with a double-strand of pearls slung around her neck, the songbird often compared to Billie Holiday performed covers like "Walkin' After Midnight" and an original song in French, "J'ai Deux Amours," or "I Have Two Loves (My Country and Paris)."

After her performance, Peyroux said singing at the Mt. Hood festival was a welcome change of pace after not performing very much this summer.

"I was so flattered and moved and personally touched by the audience," Peyroux said. "They were just stellar."

Peyroux later signed copies of her most recent CD, "Dreamland," for a long line of fans and promoted her forthcoming CD, "Careless Love," which releases Sept. 14. While she was at the jazz festival, her manager firmed up an Oct. 16 concert date at the Aladdin Theater in Portland.

All involved in the festival seemed in awe of Abbey Lincoln. Peyroux arranged to stay an extra day in Portland so she could meet her idol. Toward the end of Frank Morgan's performance, he confessed his adoration of Lincoln.

"If you wonder why I'm smiling, it's because Abbey Lincoln is coming on after this, and I get to see my love," he said. "They don't make 'em like that anymore."

He also gave the crowd some advice.

"Kiss your kids when you get home tonight," he said. "Say hi to your neighbor in the morning. We don't have to have bullets. Peace."

Morgan, who is often compared to the late great saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker, was in and out of prison for three decades as he struggled with a drug addiction. In his later years he has kept clean and begun performing again.

"Morgan is like something from the past, truly," McSwain said. "His style is that of an old master who lived a tough life, and he's still alive to play jazz and it shows in his music. It was very soulful and touching to me."

Many in attendance, including audience member Sam Murray, expressed their hope that the festival continues to be an annual tradition in Gresham.

"It's got to go on," Murray said. "The locals have to be taught that there's this culture out there that they can be a part of. We need to reach out more to families and not just to the jazz aficionados. I feel like Gresham doesn't realize how lucky they are. I mean, we're listening to these legends on a ballpark. Aren't we lucky? It's as simple as that."

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