

Jazzman Johnny O'Neal is Fest's quick convincer

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Listen now to three high notes from the life of Johnny O'Neal, headliner of this weekend's Old Town JazzFest, beginning with the most recent.

Not long ago, the soulful and (usually) gentlemanly Detroit pianist got an unexpected 9 a.m. call during a gig in Birmingham, Ala.

"A lady said they were making a movie about Ray Charles starring Jamie Foxx, called 'Unchain My Heart,'" O'Neal recalls. She told O'Neal they were considering him for the movie.



Soul machine: Jazzman Johnny O'Neal has the scary virtuosity of his idol, Oscar Peterson, but O'Neal's gospel roots and emotional heft help him tap deep emotions as well. (Courtesy of Johnny O'Neal)

"Yeah, right," O'Neal sleepily muttered into the phone.

A dazzling piano virtuoso in the mold of Oscar Peterson and Art Tatum, O'Neal had worked hard for 20 years but was still little known outside the jazz world. Now a movie studio was offering to fly him to New Orleans to try out for the role of Tatum himself — O'Neal's idol as well as Ray Charles' — in a major Hollywood film.

He concluded that it was a joke, and told the lady so, in a jazz-musician-awakened-at-9-o-clock tone of voice.

"Then I look at my caller ID and it says 'Crusade Pictures,'" he says.

She accepted his hasty apology.

"I told her I've got a lot of musician friends and sometimes we play jokes on each other."

The film's title became 'Ray' (another studio, Universal, took over the project), O'Neal landed a plum part in an Oscar-winning film, and millions of people were exposed to his formidable yet

engaging style, which recalls Tatum's. (That's O'Neal's own playing on the soundtrack.)

"Ever since that movie, my drawing power has increased 80 percent," O'Neal said.

Some might call "Ray" a lucky break, but O'Neal has spent his entire career making his own breaks. Two pianists who admired O'Neal's playing had recommended him for the Tatum role.

The most brazen example of O'Neal's own break-making came in the late '70s, when he was barely 20 years old, just coming out of a youthful phase as a prize-winning gospel pianist.

While playing a gig in Gary, Ind., O'Neal learned that veteran bassist Ray Brown was playing nearby in Chicago. Brown is not only a jazz giant in his own right but also a lifelong musical soulmate to O'Neal's most cherished piano model, Oscar Peterson.

Nevertheless, O'Neal introduced himself to Brown before the gig and asked if he could sit in with the band — a bold suggestion from a seemingly wet-eared neophyte to a jazz legend.

As O'Neal remembers it, Brown said "No, we don't have sittin' in. Maybe I'll get a chance to hear you someday."

Undeterred, O'Neal waited until the set was over and the musicians packed away their instruments. He got on the stand and started playing the piano, and what happened next is so corny they couldn't put it in a movie.

"Ray Brown came out of his dressing room, came back onstage, took the cover off his bass and started playing," O'Neal says. Brown went so far as to call the young man "a new Oscar Peterson." Right away, the veteran offered to help O'Neal with his first recording date.

Chalk up another high note.

The Ray Brown incident proves that O'Neal is one of jazz's quickest convincers. The powerful combination of gospel roots and killer jazz technique even wins over fans who criticize Peterson as a cold machine.

"It's not how fast you are or how much virtuosity you have," O'Neal says. "It's how you articulate those notes with feeling, and vitality and warmth."

Staying true to the song, instead of showing off, is an ethic O'Neal got from his father. "He'd say, 'Johnny, you gonna B.S. that melody or you gonna play it for what it is?'"

O'Neal soaked up a lot of jazz from his father, who engaged in marathon record-collection battles with his friends and co-workers. Each evening, the house would fill with recorded riffs, sometimes for 10 hours running.

"All I ever heard was jazz, and I didn't really like jazz when I was a kid," O'Neal says. "I was more interested in gospel." If O'Neal wanted to listen to anything but jazz in the house, he had to go downstairs.

O'Neal's father was the first but not the last to appreciate him. The very day O'Neal moved to New York, in 1980, he had just come off a gig in Atlanta with Duke Ellington trumpeter Clark Terry, another jazz legend. O'Neal picked up a paper and saw that Terry was playing at the Blue Note

that night.

He called Terry, re-introduced himself, and asked who was playing in his band that week.

“You are,” Terry said. By sheer coincidence, Terry had just been on the phone trying to replace a pianist who’d been in an auto accident.

But this high note goes higher.

“After the gig, someone came up behind me.” Here O’Neal’s voice tightens into the basso growl of one of jazz’s greatest drummer/bandleaders. “This is Art Blakey. I want you to join my band. Next week we’re going to Europe for three months.”

“So the first day I came to New York,” O’Neal marvels, “I ended up playing at the Blue Note and joining Art Blakey’s Jazz Messengers” — one of jazz’s all-time great combos. And that’s a note high enough for a fruit bat to appreciate.

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