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### **Self-taught pianist headlines jazzfest**

Johnny O'Neal has three key duties today at the Lansing JazzFest - talking, singing and playing the piano.

All come pretty easily to him. "I enjoy running my mouth," he said.

He also enjoys running the keyboards at turbo speed. He figures he has four speeds, of which "breakneck" is one of the slowest.

"A lot of people can be fast," O'Neal said. "The important thing is to clearly articulate the notes."

He's been praised nationally: Allmusic.com calls him "a fine pianist influenced by Oscar Peterson"; director Taylor Hackford cast him as Art Tatum in the movie "Ray."

And he's especially well-known in his home town. "Detroit is one of the most influential cities as far as jazz goes," O'Neal said.

O'Neal is 49 and missed some of the hottest years of Detroit jazz. Still, he's impressed by new players, including bassist Rodney Whitaker. "Rodney is one of the real jazz gladiators," he said.

Now Whitaker heads the MSU jazz program and often works with O'Neal. He wasn't available this weekend, so O'Neal will have David Rosin on bass; Randy Gelispie will be on drums.

They'll start about 8:15 p.m., but nothing else is definite. "I don't like to go by the clock," O'Neal said.

He also needn't worry much about set lists. O'Neal once drew up a list of 1,500 songs in his repertoire; he's added a lot more.

He's been obsessed with music since he was 13 and successfully begged his dad for a piano.

"It just sat there for a while," O'Neal said. "He said, 'You've got a choice: What are you going to do?'"

So the teenager became a self-taught pianist. Later, he began singing along with his music. "I've had more gigs lately as a singer than as a pianist," he said.

His best gig came when Hackford wanted someone who looked and played like Tatum. "As soon as I played three bars, he said I was hired," O'Neal said.

So now he's a movie star. Spike Lee is considering him for a proposed film, "Shouting the Blues."

First is JazzFest in Old Town. At 5:45 p.m., O'Neal will answer questions on the River Stage. That stage also has Happendance at 2 p.m., Children's Ballet Theatre at 3 p.m. and Rosin discussing "Intro to Jazz" at 4:45 p.m.

Then O'Neal headlines.

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