

There's an aria of jazz at opera

STORY TOOLS

Clark Center becomes summer series 'cabaret'

By **Jon W. Sparks**
Contact
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Don't go to the Clark Opera Center this afternoon expecting to hear Brunnhilde offering an aria of Valkyrian finality.

The building that houses Opera Memphis will become a cabaret-like venue for jazz pianist and vocalist Johnny O'Neal, whose 3 p.m. concert inaugurates a summer jazz series at the Clark.

How did the twain meet?

"Opera Memphis approached the Mid-South Jazz Foundation eight or nine months ago and asked if we'd help put on a summer jazz series," said Jack Schaffer, special events coordinator for the jazz group.

"Eddie Kaplan and Neal Beckford motivated all this to happen. So we started talking about what kind of format and artists we wanted, and here we are today."

For a format, they've opted for an intimate cabaret style that will accommodate about 150 people, with drapes behind the musicians and tablecloths.

And for the talent, they found O'Neal irresistible. He's toured around the world with the greats, and portrayed Art Tatum in "Ray," the movie about the life of Ray Charles.

"I've been going on a jazz cruise for four years," Schaffer said. The cruises have dozens of musicians and offer more than 200 hours of jazz a week. "I met O'Neal three years ago and we developed a good friendship."

So that was a natural, but there was an even more compelling reason to call on the pianist: There was a Memphis connection.

Herman Green, the venerated saxophonist and a local jazz fixture (with his Green Machine), gave O'Neal his first gig more than 33 years ago. The pianist, only 17 at the time, saw his career soon take off.

So it'll be fitting that Green will be honored as the legacy artist of the year for his contributions to jazz in Memphis.

-- *Jon W. Sparks: 529-2533*

SUMMER JAZZ SERIES

Today's performance by Johnny O'Neal begins at 3 p.m. at the Clark Opera Center at Humphreys and Kirby.

Tickets are \$25. Series tickets are \$60 and include Annie Sellick on July 17 and The Jazz Orchestra of the Delta on Aug. 20.

Call 257-3100 or 683-9801.