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ART TATUM JAZZ FESTIVAL

Grammy winner Al Jarreau headlines the Art Tatum Festival

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BLADE MUSIC CRITIC

Al Jarreau is looking forward to singing in Toledo next week. After all, it's the home of his mentor, Jon Hendricks. The superstars can share stories, maybe even a song.

Both perform Sunday night at the Art Tatum Jazz Heritage Festival. The men met 40-some years ago in California. At the time, Hendricks was the ultimate jazz insider, with a long-running engagement at Sausalito's famed Trident nightclub. Jarreau was an aspiring singer working a day gig as a rehabilitation counselor for the state.

"Back then, I went in to hear Jon as often as I could. He has been a mentor. I've long been listening to him and emulating him in his music and poetic notions, also in the longevity of his career," said Jarreau, 66.

While Jarreau traces his roots to Hendricks, the 84-year-old Hendricks traces his to pianist Art Tatum, family friend and neighbor. "I was just a kid at [Toledo's] Robertson Junior High School. After school I would go to Art's house for lessons. He would sit down at the piano and say, 'Let me hear you sing this.' Then he would play an arpeggio and I would try to sing it. I would miss some notes and he would do it again.

SCHEDULE

Art Tatum Jazz Heritage Festival schedule for next weekend:

Saturday

2:30 p.m. — The Ohio Music Educators Association Honors Jazz Ensemble
3:10 — Johnny O'Neal
4:15 — The University of Toledo Faculty Jazz Ensemble
5:10 — The Toledo Jazz Orchestra: A Tribute to Charlie "Chazz" Mewhort
6:25 — The Blue Suit Blues Review: A Tribute to Art Griswold featuring Roman Griswold, Ron 'Crawdaddy' Crawford, Big Blues Bob and Voodoo Libido
7:40 — Joey DeFrancesco
8:55 — Roomful of Blues
10:30 — Peter White

Sunday

2:30 p.m. — The Rance Allen Group
4:10 — Damen Cook & Friends: A Tribute to Leon Cook
5:25 — Karrin Allyson
7:10 — Jon Hendricks
8:30 — Al Jarreau

"On it went. I remember thinking that he was blind and that maybe it would help if I closed my eyes. That's the truth,"

Hendricks told The Blade.

The seventh annual Art Tatum Jazz Heritage Festival runs Saturday and June 18 in International Park. Saturday's events feature keyboards and the blues. Sunday night features singers Karrin Allyson, Jon Hendricks, and Al Jarreau.

The festival also will honor Toledo's own. The contributions of Toledo jazz stalwart guitarists Art Griswold and Leon Cook, and Toledo native and West Coast-based drummer Chazz Mewhort will be remembered in performances featuring local musicians, friends, and relatives. All three artists died in the past year.

Featured Saturday afternoon will be Detroit-based pianist Johnny O'Neal. In 2004, O'Neal played the role of Art Tatum in the movie Ray, director Taylor Hackford's biography of Ray Charles.

For a pianist, being asked to play the role of Art Tatum is a bit like being asked to play the role of God, said O'Neal.

"Tatum was probably the greatest pianist that ever lived, bar none, jazz or classical," he said. The 49-year-old was born the same year that Tatum died. Was it intimidating playing Tatum on film? Yes and no, said O'Neal, whose verbal imagination is as lively as his musical one.

"I had been emulating Tatum for so many years that I knew what I wanted to do and sound like. Getting myself ready [for the filming] was a like a boxer getting in good shape."

To best describe the experience, O'Neal does his Mohammed Ali imitation. He compares Tatum's ghost to Ali's longtime ring-man Angelo Dundee.

"Tatum is my corner man and this is for the heavyweight title. He tells me to play bigger, stronger, faster, to keep the left hand fast and strong. He tells me I can do it and I listen. I can do it," said O'Neal.

Listening has always been the key for this soft-spoken musician. He is self-taught and never learned how to read music.



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Hendricks and Jarreau are essentially self-taught as well. Hendricks' only formal training took place those afternoons as a boy in Art Tatum's house. Jarreau's mother was a piano teacher, but never was able to teach her son to play. There was always a baseball glove on one hand, said Jarreau, who never had singing lessons either.

Vocalist Karrin Allyson also never had vocal training. She majored in music at University of Nebraska, but as a pianist. "As a student I was always busy experimenting. I had my own jazz combo, even played in an all-girls rock band. I tried lots of different styles. It was a good way to make a living and have some fun," she said last week from New York City. Eventually, she settled into singing.

Allyson's latest album, "Footprints," is currently number one on the jazz charts. It also features Jon Hendricks.

"I've been acquainted with Jon for a long time. I was a huge Lambert, Hendricks and Ross fan when I was coming up. Jon has written such great lyrics. I love his artistry," she said.

Jon Hendricks is considered the father of the singing style known as vocalese, the art of putting words to instrumental solos and then singing in the style of the instrument itself. He has won five Grammy awards, received the French Legion of Honor, and is a distinguished professor of jazz at the University of Toledo.

Al Jarreau released his first album, "We Got By," in 1975. He won his first of five Grammy awards in 1977 for the album "Look to the Rainbow." Jarreau is currently working on a disc with guitarist George Benson, who was featured at the 2005 Tatum Festival.

The Toledo Jazzfest began in the early 1980s to bring attention to the Toledo Jazz Orchestra. Six years ago, the Toledo Jazz Society got permission to use the Tatum name. The event has grown each year, from a mostly local enterprise to one that brings in major talent from across the country. For the second year running, Daimler Chrysler has supported the festival with a \$100,000 grant.

Art Tatum was born in Toledo in 1909 and is considered one of the greatest jazz artists of all time. He died in Los Angeles at age 47.

"Singing a song with Tatum, especially a ballad, was like having the Chicago Symphony behind you. String section, winds, brass, it was all there. The guy was incredible," said Hendricks.

The Art Tatum Jazz Heritage Festival runs Saturday and June 18 in International Park along the Maumee River. Music begins at 2:30 p.m. both days. Saturday performers include Johnny O'Neal, Hammond B-3 organist Joey DeFrancesco, the Providence, R.I.-based octet Roomful of Blues, and guitarist Peter White. Sunday features The Rance Allen Group in the afternoon, with evening performances by Karrin Allyson, Jon Hendricks, and Al Jarreau. Tickets are \$20 a day or \$35 for both days, available from the Toledo Jazz Society, 419-241-5299 or at http://www.toledojazzsociety.org/TATUM/ticket_order.html, or at the gate.