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## 'Ray' role helps carry pianist Johnny O'Neal's career to new heights

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Johnny O'Neal has been dazzling jazz fans for years with his swift and savvy jazz piano, but after a brief appearance in the 2004 blockbuster film *Ray*, his career soared to new levels.

"This movie, man, I never imagined how much it would increase my drawing power. I fill up the places now," said O'Neal, a former Toledoan who returns for two sets tomorrow night at Murphy's Place.

In the Hollywood film, *Ray* Charles, played by Jamie Foxx, goes to a nightclub to see legendary Toledo jazz pianist Art Tatum — played by O'Neal.

During filming, O'Neal played three or four songs, although only one — "Yesterdays" — made it to the silver screen.

"That was a real honor for me, and for Toledo audiences, to play the part of one of the greatest pianists ever," O'Neal said this week from New York City, where he performed at a conference for the International Association of Jazz Educators.

"A lot of people ask me what Tatum record I was playing along with. I was playing live! That was me," he said.

Apparently, O'Neal was a little too good as Tatum — one of his real-life heroes, along with Oscar Peterson (who recommended him for the part).

"One of the producers told me that the reason why they edited me out quite a bit in the movie was that my scene was too strong, and the movie was about Ray Charles. They didn't want anything to take away from Ray," O'Neal said.

Even more frustrating, his name was misspelled in the closing credits as "Johnny O'Neill."

"I was sick about that, too," he admitted.

Nevertheless, *Ray* has been very good to O'Neal.

Last year, he went on tour with the Ray Charles Band, featured on piano and vocals, and the role helped him land a starring part as a blues musician in a major Hollywood production that begins filming in May.

In the meantime, O'Neal has some notable appearances coming up, including concerts in Moscow, two shows with singer Al Jarreau in Memphis, and a June concert at Orchestra Hall in Detroit.

A native of Detroit, O'Neal, 49, left for New York City in 1981 and was quickly hired by trumpeter Clark Terry and drummer Art Blakey.

He has performed with countless jazz legends and is grateful to have such opportunities.

"I got in at the end of an era," O'Neal said. "I do have stories to tell. I got to play with Milt Jackson, Art Blakey, Sarah Vaughan, Dizzy Gillespie — that's an honor. I'm so blessed.

"Doggoneit, I was with these people! I graced the stage with a lot of jazz masters. When I think of all the gladiators, as I call them, who came before me, that's what keeps my humility as a player. All I'm doing is passing along what they set the standard for, what they shared with me."

O'Neal joined The Murphys Trio in the late 1980s and played with the Toledo group through the 1990s. When he left, Claude Black took his spot at the ivories.

O'Neal is eager to perform with bassist Clifford Murphy and drummer Sean Dobbins tomorrow.

"Clifford has been a big inspiration to me in my life. I'm honored to come back and work with him. He's like my musical

father. He and Joan [Russell, co-owner of Murphy's Place] have always been in my corner and supportive of me. They are the reasons for my success."

Johnny O'Neal will be in concert with The Murphys Trio at 9 and 11 p.m. tomorrow at Murphy's Place, 151 Water St. Tickets are \$15, \$20, and \$25, or \$8 for students. Information: 419-241-7732.