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Jazz heavyweights square off

In this corner, Jazz Hall of Fame pianist Johnny O'Neal. In the other corner, Toledo jazz heavyweight champ Claude Black.

Put those two piano powerhouses on the same stage and it's like watching two prizefighters spar, said O'Neal, who will be featured with Black tonight and tomorrow at Murphy's Place in what is being billed as "Dueling Pianos III."

"It's like a battle of the pianos," O'Neal said. "Oh, Claude, he gets me fired up! We get each other fired up! It's not a competition, but there's a real high energy level and people really get into it."

O'Neal is a familiar figure to many Toledoans for his years of playing piano with the Murphys Trio. He left town in the early 1990s but has returned for several jazz concerts including two previous "duels" with Black, who replaced him on piano with the Murphys.

"This is like a coming-home reunion," O'Neal said. "I have the greatest admiration and respect for Claude. And Clifford Murphy [bass player and club co-owner] has always been one of my closest friends. In my early years, Clifford was a great musical inspiration to me.

O'Neal, who was inducted into the Jazz Hall of Fame in 1998, portrays one of his musical heroes and a genuine Toledo legend, Art Tatum, in the movie *Unchain My Heart: The Ray Charles Story* starring Jamie Foxx, due out this fall.

"When I first got called and got cast, I thought somebody was playing a joke on me," he said.

Charles, who idolized Tatum, goes to see him perform in one of the movie's scenes, in which O'Neal plays in Tatum's virtuoso style on piano.

Artists like Tatum, who was born in Toledo in 1909 and died in New York in 1956, have helped Toledo earn a worldwide reputation as a jazz haven, O'Neal said.

"Toledo is well known among jazz musicians," he said. "I've heard a lot of great musicians say they just want to come to Toledo and play because Art Tatum is from here."

Black is one of the premier jazz pianists ever to have called Toledo home. He has performed with such jazz greats as Charlie "Bird" Parker, Stan Getz, Joe Henderson, Wes Montgomery, and Ben Webster.

He also played piano with Aretha Franklin's band from 1965 to 1967. "Kids always ask me what stars I've played with and I just tell them Aretha," Black once said. "That's all they really care about anyway."

He has devoted much of his time in the last few years to jazz education, visiting local schools and introducing children to the style of music to which he has devoted so much of his life.



Piano powerhouses Claude Black and Johnny O'Neal share the keyboard.

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