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Trumpet rising: Sean Jones' international emergence could help lift Pittsburgh's jazz scene

Music Preview

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By Peter B. King, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Larry Roberts/Post-Gazette

Sean Jones, at Pittsburgh's Backstage Bar in 2007: "I feel a very intense obligation to be out and supporting this music that has saved my life."

Some of us know where we're going in life earlier than others. Take Sean Jones.

He is first trumpet with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, a friend of Wynton Marsalis, a three-time winner of Downbeat Magazine's "rising star" award, the leader on five CDs that have earned international notice, and a professor of jazz studies at Duquesne University.

All by the age of 30.

But then, he started young.

"I was one of those kids that went against the grain -- even if it meant being totally secluded from the the popular crowd," Jones says in his strong, often emphatic voice on the phone from St. Louis, where he's touring in support of his just-released CD, "The Search Within."

"As far back as I can remember, I was always different. I was always off doing some kind of science thing or whatever when the rest of the kids were looking at what was on TV.

"When I was listening to music, even when I was 9 or 10, I was listening to what my friends were listening to. I said, 'That does nothing for me. I don't know, I just don't like it.'

"When I heard jazz, I said, 'Wow that's kind of cool. I can think about this. There's something to it.' And none of my friends dug it," he adds with a laugh.

His interest made him an outcast, he says. "I liked that I was an outcast. Because that means that I was my own person, and I noticed that people who were really successful were their own person. You have to be exceptional. "


Sean Jones CD release party

- **With:** Brian Hogans, piano; Tim Green, sax; Luques Curtis, bass, and John Davis, drums
 - **When and where:** Tuesday, 8 p.m., Cabaret at Theater Square, 655 Penn Ave., Downtown.
 - **Tickets:** \$20
 - **More information:** 412-456-6666
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Jones grew up in Warren, Ohio, near Youngstown. The church introduced him to music -- he spent countless hours singing gospel. In the fifth grade, he took up trumpet, inspired by Miles Davis. He studied privately with numerous teachers, and by the time he entered high school he was landing gigs at the Bop Stop, a popular Cleveland club.

Then came an undergraduate degree in classical trumpet from Youngstown State's highly regarded music program, a stint teaching elementary school in Ohio, and graduate work in jazz at Rutgers in New Jersey with famed trumpet professor William Fielder.

At Rutgers, he started to penetrate the New York scene, gigging and recording with established vets like Charles Fambrough and Joe Lovano. His own sound was emerging, a mixture of flawless classical technique, gospel roots and immersion in his "holy trinity" of trumpet players from the bebop and post-bop eras: Clifford Brown, Freddie Hubbard and Woody Shaw.

PG audio
 [Hear more of this interview and some of Sean Jones' music on the Believe Your Ears podcast.](#)

"Clifford Brown has a tremendous amount of exuberance and joy in his sound," Jones says. "And it's clean. There's a sophistication in it. No wasted notes. Definite purpose.

"Freddie Hubbard, I like the thickness and the swagger of his sound. He plays kind of like he's flirting with you a little bit. It's this real masculine, sort of robust, round tone.

"From Woody Shaw, I've taken the harmonic sophistication."

2004 was a particularly good year for Jones. Marsalis tapped him for a spot in the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. The group makes three monthlong tours throughout the world each year. Michigan-based Mack Avenue Records released Jones' first CD as a leader, "Eternal Journey."

In 2005, saxophonist Mike Tomaro, head of jazz studies at Duquesne, hired Jones as an artist-in-residence. The next year, Jones joined Duquesne as a professor. That brought him to Pittsburgh, a move that has positive implications for a city with a great jazz past and a more uncertain jazz future.

Jones haunts the gigs and jam sessions at local clubs until the small hours. A stocky, broad-shouldered 6-footer who oozes confidence as he strides onto a stage, he connects with his audience with a few well-chosen comments. He raises, lowers or swivels his horn with a flourish and mostly lets his music do the talking.

"I am one of those kind of musicians that needs to be around the music. For two reasons: One, because it feeds me. Just to be able to communicate through music on that basic human level, to be able to communicate love, feeds me so much energy that you could not believe.

"Also I feel a very intense obligation to be out and supporting this music that has saved my life. If I'm not at a club supporting what's going on, I don't feel like I'm worth my salt."

Despite the much-publicized closing of venues from the Crawford Grill to Dowe's on Ninth, Pittsburgh still keeps alive a club scene that may be perpetually wing-and-a-prayer but crackles with excitement -- Little E's, Roger's Humphries' Thursday night jams at CJ's, Gullifty's, Tuesday nights at the Backstage Bar, and the Monday night jams at Ava in East Liberty, to name just a few.

"To say the scene is better or worse, I'm not sure that's the proper way to describe it," Jones says. "Things change. Things morph. I think they go through cycles of reconstruction. And I think that the scene in Pittsburgh has gone through a cycle of reconstruction in the past few years.

"Some of the younger musicians have taken a leadership role, such as Howie Alexander, Tony Campbell, Tony DePaolis -- these new guys that are in town are starting to lead their own bands. Dwayne Dolphin is one of them. They've been around for a while. But they've sort of been sidemen. These guys are now leaders."

Jones notes that jazz has found a home beyond the clubs, and that foundations and non-profits are underwriting new works. He specifically mentioned the Cultural Trust, the Multicultural Arts Initiative and the Heinz Endowments.

"I think that the scene is morphing into a more educated, more diverse scene that incorporates more young people, which is good. It's exciting and rejuvenating or revitalizing, what's going on. There's going to be a huge turn in the scene in the next few years."

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