

JAZZ CITY '97

APR 14 - APR 17

LA'S LARGEST FREE JAZZ FESTIVAL

Billy Harper Quintet

Every day on his way home after school, 11-year-old Billy Harper passed by an instrument shop to see a saxophone in the store window. "I'd often just stand there and watch it because I thought it was so intriguing. I didn't know how in the world someone could play all those notes [with such a] small amount of fingers," Harper said, laughing.

The tenor saxophonist's introduction to music at age three began in the choir of AME African Episcopal Church in Houston, Texas, in 1946. It was in this setting Harper discovered the influence that would remain with him for a lifetime. "The entire ingredient of my expression in music probably comes from my experience in the black church and... the black community... and my own life experiences," he mused.



While growing up, Texas musicians Richard Dickie Boy Lillie, Don Wilkerson and Amett Cobb had a profound musical influence on Harper, along with his mentor while at North Texas State University, James Clay. But it was the spiritual development of John Coltrane, similarly influenced by the black church, that cemented Harper's connection with his music.

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Harper

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By the age of 16, Harper was playing the blues professionally on the Houston circuit. When he entered Northern Texas State University in Denton, Texas in 1961, the young sax player formed the Billy Harper Sextet and focused on an experimental program aimed at students interested in jazz.

In 1965, Harper received a Bachelor of Music degree with a major in saxophone and a minor in theory.

In 1966, after completing his university studies, Harper set out for the Big Apple. "The feeling and flavor and influence of New York was all through the music that I listened to when I was small, and the creativity and progressiveness of the changing of the music was all happening in New York," he explained. "Jazz seemed to be one of my main vehicles for expression since I was little... I could have

been in Poland and probably come out the same way," he laughed.

Harper's work with the Art Blakey Jazz Messengers took him to Europe and Japan from 1968 to 1970, an exciting period in his life that allowed him to reevaluate his perceptions of jazz on a global scale.

U.S. audiences often take for granted the beauty and richness of this distinctly American musical form, precisely because it lives all around them. However, audiences abroad perceive jazz in an entirely different way. "In other countries, it's something that they value because it's an American institution and an America creation coming to their country," Harper said.

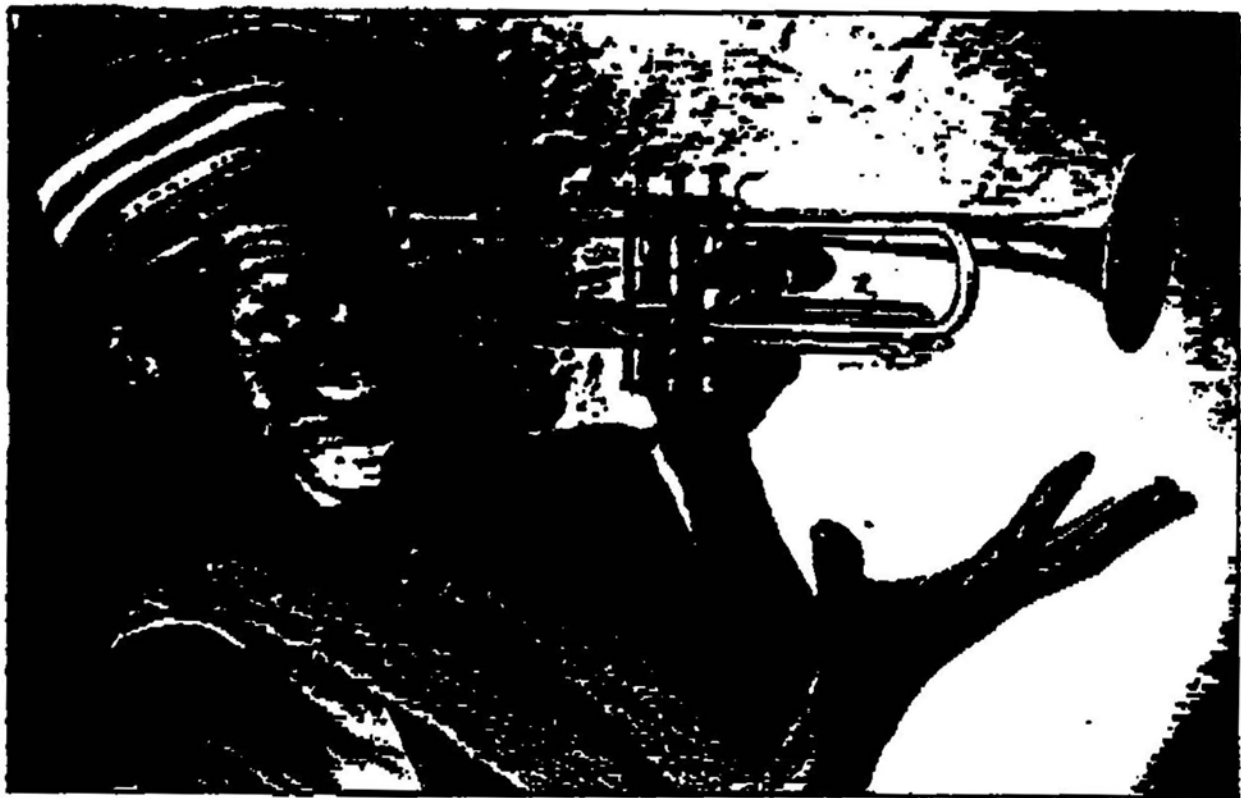
"Jazz is the most democratic expression that has come about in almost any country. Every individual has his thing to say and can say it in his way. Everyone has the freedom to speak the way he wants to speak," the saxophonist declared.

"This whole issue of value of music relates also to the value of many things in life that may be a little different in this country as opposed to other countries. America has become... the land where quick successes, quick fixes, quick anything would be the value, no matter what it is," he added.

When it comes to creating new material, Harper is at no loss for inspiration. "Social problems and political issues and religious issues and life issues—the whole scope is always part of the inspiration for what I may do," Harper said. In 1995, the album *Somalia* was released in the U.S., Harper's personal reflection on the famine gripping the east African nation. With its rousing drum beat and ardent sax, the album evokes a thoughtfulness seldom found in contemporary jazz.

In the end, rhythm and music have penetrated nearly every aspect of Harper's life. "Whenever I tried to learn basketball there was a certain kind of rhythm that was innate... I bet if you were to interview a basketball team... they'd tell you something similar to what I'm trying to say now," Harper concluded.

For more information on obtaining import releases of Billy Harper, write to: PO Box 4539 Baltimore, Maryland 21212. —YM



Michael Ray and the Cosmic Krewe

Interplanetary ambassador Michael Ray and his Cosmic Krewe land in Los Angeles April 14 to kick off Jazz City '97 with a stellar blend of the jazz-funk-of-the-future.

Ray's work as a trumpet player, vocalist, composer and producer draws international (dare we say, universal?) acclaim for the use of multimedia performances combining audio and visual components to create "a sensory perception overload. Use the beat. Use the words. Use everything you have to your advantage," the New Orleans musician advises.

Much of Ray's musical philosophy stems from his more than 15-year association with avant garde jazz master Sun Ra, which began in 1978 with Sun Ra's Intergalactic Arkestra and continued after the bandleader's death in May 1993.

"Sun Ra was a true believer that you have to play something unduplicatable, or you're going to be replaced by a button," Ray said, adding that Sun Ra considered "every note you write is like sending something up to the throne of the creator."

Ray also worked with R&B superstars Kool and the Gang for eight years during the 1980s as a front-line member, writing, producing, singing and playing trumpet. Though

he switched back and forth between the two groups throughout the 80s, Ray said "there's no connection between me working with Kool and the Gang and Sun Ra, because everyday with Sun Ra was a [new] experience... [he] was a musical pioneer."

The principle tenet of Michael Ray and the Cosmic Krewe is the meshing of both audio and visual elements. "I'm a true believer that people come to see you and hear you, and I always try to offer some kind of visual entertainment," Ray explained.

In 1991, with the help of neon-artist Jerry Therio, Ray conceived what he calls "Neon Sound Performances," sculptures that alter rhythmic and color patterns at Ray's musical cue.

"Just like notes, color and rhythm are the same thing," Ray explained.

All of this stimulus can be too much for some people, Ray said with a laugh. "A lot of people would watch a Sun Ra concert and sometimes they'd say 'Man, I walked away with a headache' because they're trying to take it all in."

His advice for cosmic-minded concert goers? "Just let it flow and tune in with your spirit." — YMI

The Phil Ranelin Jazz Ensemble



When his music teacher handed him a trombone at age 11, it wasn't because Phillip Ranelin seemed a natural for brass, it was the only instrument left for the boy at the end of the line. "It took me half a day to figure out how to put the thing together," the musician recalled with a chuckle over soup and coffee at Denny's on a recent Saturday afternoon.

After about a year, as the complaints from neighbors in his Indianapolis, Indiana neighborhood subsided, Ranelin began to fall in love with arguably one of the hardest instruments to play. When asked who first ignited his passion for jazz, the trombonist named his fiery jazz-buff grandmother, Helen Crawford. "She's probably the reason I ended up becoming a musician because she painted a very beautiful picture of what life would be like, and it hasn't always been the way she described it, but I don't have any regrets," Ranelin said.

Crawford, well-known by traveling musicians as a woman who liked to have fun and loved music, could always be counted on to play hostess to any number of musicians passing through Indianapolis. One time, the musician passing through just happened to be jazz giant Duke Ellington, and Ranelin described a scene from that unforgettable party at his grandmother's home.

"Duke had had a few drinks and was sitting at the piano attempting to play some melody and everyone that was around there, including my grandmother, was saying 'No Duke, you're too high, you're too high.' And every time they would say it, he would moderate down a half step on the piano, thinking that they were talking about the key being too high, when really they were talking about him being too loaded to play!"

Ranelin's early musical influences ranged from R&B to blues great Big May Belle to the legendary Charlie Parker, and everything in between, shaping his own playing style and repertoire, which he describes as a mix of be-bop and straight-ahead jazz, standards and blues tunes. "A lot of times I will revise them to give them a different flavor and create something that fits my particular style," he explained.

That flavor heats up on his debut album as a front man, *A Close Encounter of the Very Best Kind*, released in May 1996. This celebration of the trombone is a dedication to some of the creative geniuses who have made countless contributions to the world of jazz, including Miles Davis, J.J. Johnson, Freddy Hubbard, Joe Henderson and

Dizzy Gillespie. The sensuous sounds of the tracks "Solar" and "Forever Yours" conjure up images of a sultry night in Rio, while Ranelin's haunting performance of Johnson's opus "Lament" creates a visceral reaction in the awestruck listener.

Ranelin re-worked the rhythm section of the first track on the CD, Miles Davis's "Solar," using conga drums to create a pulsing African beat and give the classic cut a Samba feeling. Although "Latin flavor is a term that is recognizable, it's actually an African influence... because of the drums," he pointed out, adding that

Latin music and African rhythm are inseparable. "Sometimes these different rhythms turn up in something I compose and I say 'Wow! Where did that come from?' but it's just a part of me, that African/Latin influence."

For his upcoming performance at Jazz City '97, Ranelin will be accompanied by guitarist Lenny Koonse, Tony Dumas on bass, drummer Ralph Penland, George Harper on sax and flute and Taumbu on the conga drums, all of whom performed on his debut album.

Ranelin's more than thirty-five year career as a trombonist, composer and arranger has included performances with Smokey Robinson, The Temptations, Gladys Knight, B.B. King, Stevie Wonder, Sarah Vaughan, Michael Jackson and countless others. "I feel very fortunate to have played so many different styles. I think every musical experience helps broaden your total concept," he stated.

Unfortunately, "it's still an uphill battle to get recognition anywhere... with jazz. You either have to be extremely young or extremely old. Now I'm pretty old, but I'm not quite old enough to be at the point where they really want to promote me," Ranelin said wryly.

While Ranelin has toured extensively in the US, performing in the Caribbean and Africa would be a real treat for the trombone player from Indianapolis. However, if the truth be told, any place on the map would satisfy him, because "as long as the music is the kind of music I enjoy playing, the place doesn't really matter," Ranelin said, smiling. —YM

The Los Angeles Jazz Choir



Imagine, if you will, a community college course so popular with students that they return year after year, filling the class, long after leaving to study at other universities. And who can blame them, when the course in question was the jazz choir at Pierce College, taught by renowned music expert Dr. Gerald Eskelin?

In 1982, the group separated from the college and evolved into the L.A. Jazz Choir, a vibrant musical force unlike any other, according to Eskelin. With its unique fusion of swing and jazz, peppered with gospel harmonies and a dash of funk, the L.A. Jazz Choir sends audiences on a soaring, joyous musical adventure.

Twelve is the magic number for this choir, Eskelin said while describing its philosophy. In traditional choral music, the singers are

divided into soprano, alto, tenor and bass voices, but not in the L.A. Jazz Choir. "We just number the singers from one to twelve (six women, six men) and the music is scored as if each were an independent entity and then mixed and matched for various flavors and textures," Eskelin explained.

"In essence, we treat the group like a vocal big band with twelve instruments plus a rhythm section. [For example], the top four girls will sing the trumpet parts, a mixed group of five will sing the saxophone parts, and the other three guys will sing the trombone parts—literally right from the notes that the composer wrote for the big band," he added.

Eskelin's inspiration for this original approach stemmed from the influences of big

band leaders Count Basie and Stan Kenton, as well as choral leader Fred Waring. "It's kind of a natural marriage then to give birth to this group, which is a cross between instrumental and vocal jazz," the director said.

Members of the choir share his enthusiasm for big band arrangements. Eric Seppala, who joined the choir in 1991, enjoys performing the medleys of composers Earl Brown and Johnny Mercer. "A lot of it goes into 12 parts, with every voice designated a different instrument. It's very challenging but very rewarding to make that kind of sound," he said.

Sandy Howell has been with the choir for two and a half years, and said each new performance of the a cappella numbers "amazes me, because of the strength of the group... It gives me chills every time we do it."

With scarce exceptions, the music performed by the L.A. Jazz Choir is easily accessible to listeners, even those not particularly fond of jazz. Cole Porter standards and George Gershwin tunes, for example, are staples of the group. In fact, familiar songs seasoned with the L.A. Jazz Choir flavor comprise most of the group's repertoire, Eskelin said.

However, just because the tunes are familiar, don't expect an ounce of laziness from this group. "In order to sing with this choir, you not only have to be a good-looking singer, but you have to be able to read notes right off the page, have some experience in style, blending and tuning... This would be the top five percent or less" of all professional singers making money today, Eskelin explained. "We need a special kind of singer who can not only sing beautifully, but read [the notes] immediately from the pages; this way we keep the best people and can put together a fantastic show." —YM

The Sherman Ferguson Quartet

At age 13, Sherman Ferguson bartered for the musical gift of a lifetime. A drummer friend, sorely lacking finesse on the basketball court, approached the athletic youth with a proposition. "He and I made a deal that if I taught him something about basketball, he'd teach me something about drums, and that's how I got started," the 53-year-old Philadelphia native explained.

Hot licks and jam sessions resounded in Ferguson's neighborhood as he grew up: "You couldn't walk down our block without hearing jazz... the whole neighborhood was musical...[and] I got a chance to hear and play with some now very well-known musicians," he added.

In fact, Odean Pope, a tenor saxophonist who played with Max Roach's band for more than 20 years, lived next door to Ferguson and inspired the young drummer to keep practicing, even as adolescent temptations beckoned.

"In the back of my mind it was always my desire to play jazz," Ferguson said, but in the early days, playing James Brown and R&B tunes kept his stomach full and a roof over his head.

The drummer's first jazz triumph came with the release of the album *Desperado* with Pat Martino in 1970. Although a side man in the quartet, Ferguson's experience recording in Rudy Van Gelder's New Jersey studio was a phenomenal one for the young musician, and the fact that the album is still in stores 27 years later speaks to its lasting quality.

Following extensive study and performances on the East Coast, Ferguson relocated to Los Angeles in 1976 and now lives in Glendale with his wife, Anni. Aside from his hectic performance schedule, Ferguson teaches jazz drumming at the Los Angeles Music Academy in Pasadena and at CalArts in Valencia. He also serves on the advisory board for the California Institute for the Preservation of Jazz, at California State University, Long Beach. Dedicated to preserving and promoting jazz in general, the board strives to spotlight Southern California's musicians and unique jazz scene.

What started off as a whim blossomed into a rich and varied career for Ferguson, and has included performances with jazz legends Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Carter, Freddie Hubbard and Eddie Harris, as well as extensive touring throughout Europe, Japan, Brazil and the United States.

In November 1996, Ferguson and Benny Carter played in Bangkok, Thailand for and with King Bhumibol Adulyadej, a jazz aficionado and sax player himself. Coming up in June 1997, Ferguson will join the seven-piece jazz and blues group David Basse and the City Lights Orchestra in Hong Kong for the historic changeover to communist China.

From the basketball courts of Philadelphia to Bangkok, Thailand, one thing remains the same for Ferguson: "I've wanted to play jazz music from the very beginning," he said, adding that his preference will never change.

Joining Ferguson for his Jazz City '97 performance of jazz standards and classics are Harold Bennett on tenor sax and flute, Larry Koonse on guitar, and Andy Simpkins on bass.