

A heartfelt performance

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Local jazz crooner Tommy Gearhart invites a few old jazz friends to help generate funds and awareness of multiple sclerosis

By Kevin Hopper

To most casual observers, the name Jon Hendricks may not carry the same weight as jazz luminaries like Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk or Art Tatum. However, if you were to ask any of those instrumentalists (all of whom likely preferred not to put vocals to their music) who their jazz vocalist of choice was, they would have probably pointed to Hendricks.

“Jon is the consummate musician, the consummate lyricist,” Albuquerque jazz vocalist Tommy Gearhart explained in a recent interview with Local IQ. “He trained Bobby McFerrin, Al Jarreau, Mark Murphy. All the top singers reference him as an influence. He’s the one who wrote a lot of the Grammy-winning music for The Manhattan Transfer.”

Gearhart’s connection to the legendary Hendricks goes far beyond musical influence. The hometown of both singers (Gearhart a jazz drummer-turned singer) is Toledo, Ohio, where a rather deep well of jazz talent exists.

“[In terms of jazz], Toledo has been overshadowed by Detroit, which is 25 minutes north, but the great Art Tatum is from Toledo,” Gearhart said. “Growing up, any night of the week I could have walked in and saw Fathead Newman playing at the club or George Benson playing the guitar — just a ton of people [played there]. They all had to come through Toledo to get to Cleveland or Detroit.

Gearhart’s childhood home in Toledo was located within earshot of one of the town’s hottest jazz clubs. Because of this, the young, aspiring musician grew up hearing, seeing and getting to know many jazz giants.

“I was lucky, I grew up with a lot of jazz clubs in my town,” Gearhart said.

And though Gearhart had long admired his hometown vocal hero, he didn’t come into contact with him until a few years back.

“Four or five years ago, I went back home to play and one of my friends, Andre Wright, invited Jon to come see me,” Gearhart recalled. “He said ‘Jon, you really gotta see Tommy sing,’ and Jon said, ‘the drummer, really?’”

“And so he came out to the gig and he seemed to be impressed. He came up and sat in on some tunes. Afterward, he whispered in my ear and asked me if I could do a master class, even though I’m not a master. Ever since then, he and I have been attached at the hip as best possible. I talk to him about every week.”

Thankfully, that friendship has resulted in Hendricks paying Gearhart a huge favor by making a local appearance for a very special cause: multiple sclerosis.

“I sit on the board of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society,” Gearhart said explaining how his upcoming benefit concert, Healing, Harmony & Heart came about, “After sitting there, seeing where most of the money is raised —the bike and the run and this really expensive ‘Dinner of Champions’ — I thought it was kind of ironic, though those are very important demographics, that most people with M.S. can’t participate in them. So I wanted to come up with a culturally meaningful event. I know jazz and I love philanthropic activities and getting involved in the community, so I started brainstorming and this is the result.”

The concert, scheduled to be held at the National Hispanic Cultural Center on September 20, aims to raise money and awareness for the Accelerated Cure Project for Multiple Sclerosis, a cause that Gearhart said hits home.

“I have two really close friends who have M.S., one who recently got diagnosed and one who is in a wheelchair who has progressive multiple sclerosis,” Gearhart shared. “Also, my wife’s grandfather and great aunt both died of complications from M.S. and her aunt has M.S., so that is my connection to it.”

Along with the rare performance by given by Hendricks, the concert also features a homecoming engagement by former Albuquerque resident and world-renowned pianist Awadagin Pratt. Gearhart emphasized that bringing in top talent such as Hendricks and Pratt was a necessary component in creating a successful, well-attended event.

“I’m not a world-class act yet,” Gearhart politely offered, “but fortunately I have worked with a lot of world-class people and I grew up with a lot of people like this, so I have a great network myself of people who want to help me out.”

Healing, Harmony & Heart

Featuring Jon Hendricks and Awadagin Pratt

6p, Sun., Sep. 20

National Hispanic Cultural Center

1701 4th SW, 505.246.2261

\$30/\$75 (VIP Package)

Tickets: 505.681.6883 or healingharmonyheart.com

harmonyware.com

awadagin.com

tommygearhart.com