

Tyner's yearly swing

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Like a comet returning on its regular orbit to blaze a trail across the nighttime sky, jazz pianist McCoy Tyner will arrive in the Bay Area on Jan. 27 to begin his 10th annual two-week residency at Yoshi's jazz club in Oakland.

One of the most revered stars in jazz, Tyner, 65, came to prominence as a member of one of the most influential bands in jazz history, the famed 1960s group led by John Coltrane. Since his days with Coltrane (1960 to 1966), he's recorded dozens of albums under his own name, in settings from solo, to Latin, to big band, and dozens more with colleagues like Joe Henderson, Sonny Rollins and Wayne Shorter. Tyner's most recent CD, 2003's "Land of Giants" with vibist Bobby Hutcherson, is a characteristically intricate, joyful affair, at turns flowing and explosive.

Having a jazz musician of Tyner's magnitude set up shop here for two straight weeks every year for 10 years is exceptional enough, but the pianist's Yoshi's residencies are made more intriguing by the musicians the club brings in to perform with him. Each year, Yoshi's artistic director Peter Williams, in collaboration with his Tyner, assembles two groups of top-ranked players, one for each week of Tyner's stay. During the first week, Tyner will play with drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts and bassist Christian McBride, both excellent contemporary jazzmen. The second week's program will feature two tenor saxophonists offering direct links to Tyner's days of innovation with Coltrane: Pharaoh Sanders, a frequent Coltrane collaborator, and Ravi Coltrane, John Coltrane's son.

For Tyner and Williams, the goal for each week of the residency is that something exciting and new be created. One reward of this process, Williams says, is watching a stage of individual musicians evolve into a tight-knit ensemble over the course of the week.

"A few years back," Williams says, "we had Terrance Blanchard on trumpet, George Coleman on sax, Charnett Moffett on bass and Brian Blades on drums to perform with McCoy. A lot of these guys knew each other and had worked together, but they'd never played together in one group. The first night, while the music was good, you could tell it was a little rough onstage. But by the time Sunday night rolled around, it was a real band. You could tell they were ready to go on the road."

Tyner's style is forceful and distinctive, at the same time melodic and percussive, his playing a constant exploration of the modal possibilities within each composition. The performances featuring Sanders and Coltrane during Tyner's second week are likely to provide some serious fireworks. Sanders, who performed and recorded frequently with John Coltrane, plays with a headlong, wailing improvisational style reminiscent of the more experimental music Coltrane made during his later days.

"He's got a wonderful sound," Tyner says of Sanders in a telephone interview. "Pharoah definitely sounds like Pharoah, but you can tell that he was inspired a lot by Coltrane, tone-wise. It's been a while since Pharoah and I have done anything together, so it will be interesting to see what's going to happen." Sanders and Tyner recorded a Grammy-winning album in 1988, "Blues for Coltrane: A Tribute to John Coltrane," with saxman David Murray.

Ravi Coltrane was only 2 when his father passed away in 1967 at the age of 40, but he was brought up by a musician -- his mother, pianist and harpist Alice Coltrane, who played in her husband's later bands. Ravi has built a reputation on tenor sax. While his style is his own, he is not averse to letting traces of his father's signature sound seep through from time to time. His recent CD, "Mad 6," opens and closes with John Coltrane compositions, but it's the Ravi Coltrane originals that really take make the recording special.

Tyner first played with Ravi Coltrane at a 1995 ceremony honoring the release of a John Coltrane postage stamp. "We played 'My Favorite Things,' " Tyner says. "That was the first time I'd heard Ravi, and since then he's grown quite a bit. It'll be nice to hear his progress and see where he's at."

Tyner, Sanders and Coltrane will get a solid foundation from bassist Charnett Moffett and drummer Eric Harland, who have been performing with Tyner for months as his regular rhythm section.

"Here's the thing," Tyner says. "Eric and Charnett have really gelled as my rhythm section. We've done a lot of work together, and they're very energetic guys. So the rhythm section is all set. All Pharoah and Ravi and I need to do is connect up."

For jazz fans who like their piano straight, the first week of this year's residency may be the preferred ticket, when Tyner performs in the trio setting with Watts and McBride. Watts is an often fascinating drummer who keeps audiences on their toes with graceful tempo changes and imaginative voicings, and McBride is an accomplished and versatile bassist. Both have performed with Tyner in the past.

"That trio's not going to have any rough spots," Tyner predicts. "They should fit right in because they're familiar with my style."

When asked if there would be any communication issues between the three, Tyner just laughs.

"Oh, man, let me tell you. Those two guys? I'll have to hold them back. I'm not worried about them at all. They're dynamos."

McCOY TYNER: The jazz pianist performs his 10th annual two-week residency Jan. 27 through Feb. 8 at Yoshi's, 510 Embarcadero West, Oakland. Tickets: \$20- \$30. Call (510) 238-9200 or go to yoshis.com.

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Jazz pianist McCoy Tyner is making his annual visit to the Bay Area later this month, taking up a two-week residency at Yoshi's in Oakland. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward



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