

Pop Talk: World of jazz is thinking small these days

by George Varga

"Let's get small" was the name of a popular Steve Martin comedy routine in the late 1970s, but it's also an apt description of how the jazz community reacted to the sometimes dramatic changes in the music industry over the past year.

Accordingly, the benefits of thinking small echoed throughout the 34th annual International Association of Jazz Educators (IAJE) conference. It was held Jan. 10-13 at the Hilton New York and Sheraton New York and included approximately 8,000 attendees from 45 countries.

IN THE MOODY - James Moody brought down the house at the recent International Association of Jazz Educators conference with his ebullient vocal duet with Roberta Gambarini, left. Moody is featured on two Grammy-nominated albums, including Gambarini's 'Easy to Love.' CNS Photo courtesy of R. Andrew Lepley. With more major record labels cutting back, consolidating or eliminating their jazz divisions, the necessity of thinking small is greater than ever.

That reality was reinforced by last month's near-implosion of Verve Records, one of the oldest, largest and once most respected jazz labels in the country. The home to such top artists as Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock and Diana Krall, Verve will now be operated under the Universal Music Enterprises umbrella.

Verve's downsizing came the same month that the Tower Records chain, which offered the country's most comprehensive selection of jazz albums, closed its doors forever.

While these developments are a major blow for pop music, which is reeling in this age of digital music and legal (and illegal) file-sharing and downloading, jazz as a niche music has been hit even harder.

"It's a major paradigm shift," said Bill McFarlin, IAJE's executive director.

"It may not be as huge as the shift from silent movies to talkies, but it's a big turning point. What you're seeing is the result of a shift in the way music is produced and consumed, and in the way people pay for it. One thing IAJE is trying to do is create a dialogue about where we're going. The survival of the recording industry will be very important for jazz."

Such adversity is nothing new for a music that has long been embraced around the world, but is still striving for more respect and recognition here in the land of its birth. To help achieve that goal, the National

Endowment for the Arts this year will dramatically boost the size of its "NEA Jazz in the Schools" program. By the end of 2007, it will be available to 8 million high school students, up from 4 million last year.

"I think jazz has been so under-recognized and underappreciated in its home country, but it is alive and healthy," said Dana Gioia, the NEA's music-savvy chairman.

Gioia was at IAJE for the 25th anniversary of the endowment's Jazz Masters awards, which this year honored seven veteran artists, including pianist-composer Toshiko Akiyoshi and saxophonists Frank Wess and Phil Woods.

But at least two of this year's Jazz Masters, Woods and pianist Ramsey Lewis, are frustrated with the state of the music to which they have devoted their lives.

"Jazz is an all-encompassing art form that changed the planet. But without being able to regularly tour in Europe and Japan, I wouldn't have been able to keep my band together for the past 30 years," said Woods, who with San Diego sax great James Moody will receive the Grammy Awards' President's Merit Award Feb. 6 in Los Angeles.

Lewis, conversely, has a sizable audience in this country. The veteran pianist is heard and seen by millions each week as the host of the PBS TV series "Legends of Jazz" and the "Legends of Jazz with Ramsey Lewis" radio show (which now airs in 175 cities nationally).

His high profile notwithstanding, Lewis pointed his finger directly at musicians and the American jazz audience.

"Jazz people are passive people," he charged. "They don't spread the word. We don't go to non-jazz people, and say: 'Have you heard this?' We need to help ourselves, because Madison Avenue sees us, they watch us, and they watch all these students gather at IAJE. And then they watch us go back into the world and just talk to each other.

"So we have to ask: What can we do to further the music? We musicians talk the talk, but how many of us walk the walk?"

For a younger generation of jazz artists and entrepreneurs, one increasingly popular solution is to do it themselves.

"We're boning up on digital distribution," said Donna Nichols, who with pop-jazz flutist Bradley Leighton co-owns and operates Pacific Coast Jazz, a four-year-old record label based in San Diego. "The big goal is to keep our presence known after losing our presence at Tower and other retail outlets."

Trumpeter Dave Douglas and saxophonists Branford Marsalis and Sonny Rollins are among the prominent musicians who once recorded for major labels but left to launch their own independent record companies. Others, including former San Diego trumpeter Brian Lynch, have opted to record for ArtistShare, a jazz-friendly label whose albums are available only online, not at any retail outlets.

Like a growing number of jazz artists, Lynch also uses his Web site to market his music directly to fans.

"Making money is not my direct goal," said Lynch, a member of Woods' band and a current Grammy Award nominee for "Simpatico," his superb ArtistShare album with Latin-jazz great Eddie Palimeri.

"But you can make more money per unit by going directly to the consumer online, which is the same as selling your CDs at gigs."

Lynch was one of several former or current San Diegans who performed at this year's IAJE. Others include pianist (and SDSU jazz professor) Rick Helzer and sax legend Moody, whose Jan. 12 performance with the Dizzy Gillespie All-Star Big Band included a crowd-pleasing vocal duet with Italian singer Roberta Gambarini on the Gillespie favorite "Blue 'n' Boogie."

Moody was also featured at a Jan. 10 ceremony at Jazz at Lincoln Center in Manhattan, where he joined Nancy Wilson and other luminaries for the unveiling of a commemorative stamp honoring jazz vocal icon Ella Fitzgerald, with whom he toured extensively in 1946.

"I would like to congratulate the U.S. Postal Service for being hip enough to issue an Ella Fitzgerald stamp," Moody told the capacity audience, which included former New York Mayor David Dinkins and big band leader Gerald Wilson. Significantly, Moody was the only speaker whose salute to Fitzgerald also touched on the segregation and rampant racism of the era in which he and she achieved stardom.

For other IAJE attendees, the conference offered valuable insight about what it takes to achieve a career in jazz, if not fame.

"This is great," said guitarist Nathan Jarrell, a senior in SDSU's jazz studies department. "It's not often you get so many incredible players all in one place at one time."

San Diego vocalist Tokeli was even more effusive.

"For a first-timer at IAJE, I ate it up," she said. "I sang, I listened, I networked. And I kept listening and listening - and learning. It was wonderful and inspiring and it will take me another week to soak it all up."

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