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Hartford Public Library
Saskia Laroo, Warren Byrd Open "Baby Grand" Series
Amsterdam Meets Hartford In Free Show

By Owen Mc Nally - Special To The Courant

First picture subscript: Saskia Laroo and Warren Byrd perform Jan 6 in th "Baby Grand Jazz Series" at the Hartford Public Library.

First picture by Steven Sussman

Second picture subscript:

Saskia Laroo of Amsterdam and Hartford's own Warren Byrd collaborate again for the Hartford Public Library's 2013 jazz series.

Trumpeter Saskia Laroo and pianist Warren Byrd, one of the finest trans-Atlantic jazz alliances of the 21st century, get the popular "Baby Grand Jazz Piano Series 2013" off to a high-flying start Sunday at 3 p.m. in the cozy, light-filled atrium at The Hartford Public library.

Laroo, a native of Amsterdam, is so evocative of Miles Davis that she's been hailed as "The lady Miles of Europe."

When in Europe, Lady Miles' home is Amsterdam. When in the states, it's Hartford, a city she's grown to love as she has performed here frequently to much acclaim since her first local appearances nearly a dozen years ago.

A Hartford native and one of the city's premier jazz talents, Byrd has spread his creative wings far beyond his local and New England stomping grounds on his countless collaborations with the charismatic Laroo. In the duo format and in other configurations led by Laroo, Byrd has played

around the world from the Netherlands, throughout Europe and the U.S. to China, Russia and India, with additional triumphant appearances in Brazil, Thailand, Senegal and many other countries.

Celebrating their acclaimed recent release, "Two of a Kind, A Tribute to Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk" -an inventive, exciting exploration of modern jazz – the dynamic duo launches the library's weekly Sunday series that presents 15 free matinee concerts over the next four months in the main branch in the heart of downtown Hartford.

Along with surprises, the pair's repertoire includes selections of their recent album; pieces from Byrd's new project inspired by "Kind of Blue," Miles Davis' milestone album; and songs sung by Byrd, including an original and a standard by the composer/pianist. A kaleidoscopic variety of numbers reflects the duo's style that embraces everything from bebop and hip-hop and beyond.

With their volleys of witty exchanges and quick-change artist's ability to switch in and out of



genres, the duo can seem like at least a two-ring, maybe even a three-ring circus.

Byrd doubles on piano and vocals, while Laroo can switch from a searing Harmon-muted trumpet solo to swinging choruses on stand-up bass, showing cool classic chops and warm jazz soul. Or, if Laroo decides to bring along her saxophone, she can bang out solos on her alto sax, an instrument the musician has recently been re-integrating into her repertoire.

All this prestidigitation is rooted in the duo's free-flowing interaction powered by the tight, intuitive connection they've honed to a razor's edge while rockin' in rhythm in venues around the world. With stress on telepathic interplay, they move seamlessly from number to number offering extemporaneous explorations into virtually any musical turf or direction that their individually liberated but somehow in-sync imaginations may take them.

With their bold brand of improvisational chamber jazz, it doesn't matter much whether they're celebrating the spirit of Miles or Monk, Bird or Diz, or soaring on a free jazz piece, grooving in a mainstream mood, romancing a ballad or dancing into a United Nations assembly of world music they've absorbed on their international tours. Whatever mercurial route they choose in the moment, their music bears the indelible Laroo/Byrd, Two of a Kind imprint, whether they're playing, or, more accurately, playing with salsa, funk, Caribbean delights, or improvising ultra-hip pop that's accessible, danceable and even juiced up with plugged-in electronic flavor.

"Among other things, we're also going to explore some free music with Saskia bringing her electronic effects while I do some strumming inside the piano strings," says Byrd, a frequent and favorite-son performer at the library's swinging series.

"I don't want to talk too much about what's going to happen. Things will happen in the moment," promises Byrd, a longtime inner circle member of the elite core of jazz players who have put Hartford on the map as a medium-size city with an unusually large-size, talent-laden jazz scene.

The Courant talked to Byrd. Laroo was finishing up her most recent tour in Amsterdam.

Q: How did you and Saskia first meet?

A: Domingo Guerra, then a prominent Hartford producer, presented her for a couple nights in 2001 at Main and Hopewell, a restaurant in Glastonbury. I was a sideman in her band. There was a problem with the sound system and, I think she was impressed with how much energy I put into being heard. I was giving it all I had and she was impressed by that.

Later I had my first tour with her, which led to other tours, with up to now 100 tours with different formations, quite a few as a duo. The place where the duo exploded for us was in Brazil in 2006 or 2007. Between late 2005 and early 2008, there were something like 20 tours. I mean like it's all a blur.

Q: What has all that intense globe-trotting done for your mind?

A: Whereas I may have thought I knew everything before, I found out I don't know anything.

Q: Why is that?

A: Well, it's true because it's so easy to become part of the consensus of your locale where you come from. But then you go somewhere else in the world and you see what they think about us, and you compare that to what we think about them and what we've heard, you just realize that there are a lot of gaps there in reality as we know it.

Q: It sounds like an ongoing education.

A: Very much so. It's a great eye-opener.

Q: You play all over the place and are sometimes at the mercy of whatever kind of keyboard or box is available to play on in the house. Do you have any preference as to electric or acoustic piano?

A: I'm definitely old school in that regard. Unfortunately, I can't indulge myself all the time, but I love to play a real piano. There was a period when it didn't matter how bad it was. I just had to play a real piano.

Q: Why is that?

A: It's just the feeling of it. It's so organic. It's a very visceral experience. You hit it and it's wood and strings. I think it's the next best to a human being.

Q: Where does your singing fit in here?

A: It comes from when I was very young and began singing at 4 in a church choir. When push came to shove later, though, I decided that it was better, in my mind, to sit at the piano and just play, and every once in a while contribute by singing. For a long time there was more playing than singing. I think it wasn't until Saskia insisted that I began singing on gigs. Still not on every gig, but on most of her gigs, I'll sing.

Q: In an interview you once said your imagination was your favourite instrument. Just how important is it for you as an artist?

A: It's just about everything, I think, ultimately, imagination is what it's all about. The bottom line is that imagination translates itself into what pops up in your mind and then is transmitted into the fingers or whatever part of the body you're using to express ideas and music. That's the imagination in action.

Q: How do you and Saskia get along after all these years, tours, travels and concerts?

A: She's very much a go-getter. She's very hard-working and she's fast paced. I'm a little bit more slow-paced. I try to be very deliberate and really soak in the experience of things that I'm involved with. I think between the two of us, we find the middle ground, but not without difficulty. She likes to go, and sometimes I like to hang back before I go and then really let go. It's a lot of fun, and I think the results are great.

Q: With all your international touring, do you think you might relocate to Amsterdam?

A: People ask me, 'Are you going to move over there, man? Are you moving to Holland?' The truth of the matter is I've got a lot going on here that I like. And Hartford is really my home.

Q: What keeps you here in Hartford? Many with far lesser talent move to New York or elsewhere.

A: History. My personal history. I come from a very large family and have lots of roots here. I don't want to uproot, and I'm the kind of person who can have headquarters here as well as in the Netherlands. There are so many things that can change. However, I have lots of friends here, and so much that I cherish about this town is part of my personal identity.

Q: How did you get hooked on jazz?

A: My dad grew up just before the Depression and had a great appreciation for swing music. So when I

came along many years later around the mid-'60s, there happened to be a lot of big band records in the house, mainly Glen Gray and a lot of Duke Ellington, who would ultimately be like that important one bridge between what it meant to be a fine improviser.

My brother Albert had a ridiculously large record collection of all kinds of music, everything from the cheesiest to the pippest old movie themes to Marion Brown, "Crescent" by John Coltrane, the latest Archie Shepp and recording by Paul horn and Tony Scott.

Q: What did your brother's LPs mean to you as a little kid?

A: I didn't know what they were, and me and my niece were skating on those LPs at age 4 and 5 in a little improvised skating rink in the house. They had to pull us off of them. I figure there are a couple of those records still around with our shoe marks on them.

Q: When did the importance of those LP's begin to sink in?

A: When I began to discover bebop at around the age of 12. I was a literate kid, so I read all the LPs' liner notes and kept encountering the name Charlie Parker popping up often on the backs of the albums.

It was the master takes of Bird's Savoy recordings that really blew my mind. By the time I was 13 or 14 year old, I was hooked on that, and was so for about 14 years. I can probably whistle some stuff from those recordings right now.

Q: When did you decide to commit to jazz?

A: At age 16 when I decided that jazz was my best bet. Before then I had already decided that I wanted to be some kind of a performer. I was acting in shows and plays. A very formative part of my experience as a performer was being in the Hartford Stage Company Youth Theater for about four to seven years.

Q: What is it, do you think, that drew you to jazz and made you commit to it so profoundly.

A: I think as a black person in America and with parents who told me the things that they told me, jazz sort of answers many of the questions and brings together so many of the issues that comprised my life. And it is such an easy way for me to bring where I come from to where I am going. It opens you up. You can hear. You can feel and you can absorb what's coming toward you in a way, and assimilate it and have an attitude and response.

Q: That sounds like a passionate commitment to a way of life.

A; That really does speak to what it's doing in my life.

Q: You were one of 16 kids in your family. What was it like?

A: I can't even imagine what that was like. It was a blur with constant activity. There was a concept of waves of interaction, with an older set of children, a middle set and the youngest set. I was the youngest of 16 kids, the caboose. There was never an opportunity to be bored.

Q: How did everybody even fit in the house?

A: My parents were miracle workers.

Q: You've played at the "Baby Grand Jazz Series" a number of times over the years. How many times have you performed there?

A: I've lost count, but maybe three or four times.

Q: What do you think of the series?

A: I love it.

Playing there is like playing at a mini-Carnegie Hall. It's well-attended and well-organized. The atmosphere very much speaks to an aspect of who I am. I guess what I'm trying to say is that the library has always been a fortress of solitude for me. I love the fact that I can get back to what it meant to me coming up as a young adult, and being able to go there for refuge and information.

Q: How did that connection come about?

A: The main library is in the middle of town. So I discovered it as a young adult because I had learned to get around town.

There was always an appreciation of the library that was transmitted to me by my folks. They were readers. They really appreciated the availability of education that the library afforded. They always gave that to me. I'd hear, 'Hey, man, the library is like the poor man 's college,' which is what it is.

Q: By attracting people downtown to hear jazz on Sunday afternoons, is the Baby Grand Jazz Series" a good thing for the City of Hartford?

A: It 's another point of light.

The Saskia Laroo / Warren Byrd Duo performs today from 3 to 4 p.m. in the opening concert for the admission-free "Baby Grand Jazz Series 2013" at the Hartford Public Library, 500 main St, Next up in the series on Jan. `13 is The Colbys, featuring Bev Rohlehr, lead vocals, and John Colby, keyboards and vocals. Information: www.hplct.org and 860-695-6300.