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Montco jazz quartet will bookend Wynton Marsalis at the Kimmel

By: April Olinchak - Correspondent

"First of all, a little formula. Sit and get a quill out. No, no, no," laughed Seàn J. Kennedy of the Seàn J. Kennedy Quartet as he broached a down-to-earth explanation of unsung lyrics in jazz.

"I had my little babies, Ashley and Juliet, twins, first kids. I had this line in my head. 'Ashley and Juliet Mommy and Daddy really love you.' I put rhythm to that." That rhythm became the song "Ashley and Juliet."

Kennedy sang the lyrics over the phone, then vocalized the song without the lyrics to show where the words had been and where they still lingered in the beat.

Teacher that he is, Kennedy took time to explain how he develops a song, how he translates his thoughts and emotions into musical notes that have just as much meaning for the audience as for himself. A song often starts with a line of lyrics that is stripped down to rhythm. The lyrics are lost, but then again, they aren't really. If you listen closely, if you know the story, you can feel the words, and be enveloped by the music.

Anyone who wants to be immersed in an engaging evening of jazz style storytelling will delight in SJK4's performance at the Kimmel Center's Commonwealth Plaza Stage as part of the "Free at the Kimmel" series, Friday, March 20, from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. and again around 10 p.m., just after the performance by Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra at Verizon Hall.

The SJK4 concert - comprising Seàn J. Kennedy, of Ambler, on drums; Erin Stroup, of Horsham, on saxophones; John Stenger, of Abington, on piano; and Mark Amentt, of Dresher, on bass - is free to jazz fans and all music lovers. It's music for the people.

"There are a lot of jazz snobs. Jazz snobs will say, 'if you have to tell them [the audience], then you're not doing it right.' It's pompous to assume the audience is going to get what you are trying to emote to them. You have to get my vibe. I feel obligated to tell the audience what it [the story behind the music] is.

"You have to communicate with the audience. Elton John engages the audience. A lot of jazz concerts don't do that. It's like shh, listen to how great I am. Even classical composers tell the story."

Kennedy's mastery of drumming jazz, storytelling and teaching floats off the sheet music in his live performances with SJK4, his albums "Road to Wailea" and "Queen Anne's Revenge" as well as in his book "Rock Solid" by Seàn J. Kennedy and Liberty DeVitto, due out May 1, and his more rockin' album to be released early this summer 2009.

Kennedy keeps a momentum that fuels his work, but family keeps him grounded. "I couldn't do anything without the support of family - my wife, Heather, and my children, Juliet, Aidan and Ashley. It takes time from them, even when I'm with them, my mind is elsewhere. No big world tours, unless they can go with me."

Rock music strongly influences Kennedy's music. Driving to play his last jazz festival, he listened to James Brown in the car. He teaches kids rock drumming. His book teaches rock drumming. "I never set out to lead a jazz quartet. I tried my hand at classical; it doesn't work. Instrumental jazz seems to stick, so that's why I do it."

Kennedy takes inspiration from what his students are listening to. "Nothing against Duke Ellington - it's just not what kids are listening to," says Kennedy, who strives to teach and appreciate music the way his teacher, Ray Deeley, taught him.

"He never put any style of music down, the way a lot of musicians will. I was growing up in the '80s, in high school. I was listening to Rush and Led Zeppelin. He tried to teach me this swing beat, but I wasn't interested. He would tell me to bring it in. He would listen to it and would find that element that he wanted to teach in the music.

"'Here, that's a variation of the swing beat,' he would say. And he would teach that...later he would get back around to the swing beat or whatever the lesson was. I've had a lot of great musicians and teachers teach, but I haven't had too many teachers like Ray."

"Rock Solid," with five hours of music and DeVitto reading the text aloud, follows this structure. "First you hear a complete track, with either me or Liberty playing the way Alice in Chains or Green Day would play. Then you hear the track again without the drums and you play."

The Kimmel Center concert keeps to the jazz tone of the evening, so the audience will only get a taste of the appetizer sampler that is Seàn J. Kennedy, but you'll certainly go home full on the meal of jazz, including SJK4 classics like "Sweetie Pie" and the all-you-can-eat platter of drums that is "Queen Anne's Revenge."

If you go:

Seàn J. Kennedy Quartet will perform at the Kimmel Center's Commonwealth Plaza Stage,
260 S. Broad St.,
Philadelphia, PA 19102
Friday, March 20,
6:30 - 7:30 p.m., &
again around 10 p.m.
SJK4 concert is free.
Tickets to Lincoln Center
Jazz Orchestra with Wynton Marsalis
at Verizon Hall, 8 p.m.,
are \$36 and up.
Info: 215-893-1999,
www.kimmelcenter.org
or www.seanjkenedy.com.

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