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IN CONCERT: Formidable Jazz Foursome - KICKING OFF THE NEW 'JAZZ AT THE LOBERO' SERIES, THE SPRING QUARTET BRINGS TO TOWN AN ALL-STAR GROUP WITH JOE LOVANO, JACK DEJOHNETTE, ESPERANZA SPALDING, AND LEO GENOVESE

By Josef Woodard, News-Press Correspondent
February 14, 2014 8:04 AM

IN CONCERT

The Spring Quartet

When: 8 p.m. Tuesday

Where: Lobero Theater, 33 E. Canon Perdido St.

Cost: \$40-\$105

Information: 963-0761, lobero.com

As a fitting, grand-opener concert in the new "Jazz at the Lobero" series in the newly renovated, and distinctly jazz-friendly theater (a condition duly noted by Down Beat magazine), a special, all-star group gives its musical blessing Tuesday night. Enter the stellar aggregation calling itself the Spring Quartet, and featuring some of the most rightfully and highly respected musicians on their respective instruments — tenor saxophone mater Joe Lovano, drummer Jack DeJohnette, Grammy-kissed young bassist-singer dynamo Esperanza Spalding and, from the player deserving wider recognition corner, pianist Leo Genovese.

No, you haven't heard this group on the radio. Yet. Where some new jazz groups release an album and hit the road in support of that pre-existing musical condition, the Spring Quartet reverses the order, starting from a collective idea and growing as it goes. It lives up to the name "spring," as verb, in the true, improvisation — embracing the tradition of jazz.

We recently spoke to Mr. DeJohnette on the phone while en route to a concert date in New Orleans. In the ranks of jazz drummers, he is a gentle giant, an NEA Jazz Master Award recipient whose resume is too dense to be adequately summarized in a compact space.

His past includes work with (Santa Barbara's own) Charles Lloyd, and a brief, but acclaimed period with Miles Davis in a fiery, "lost group" never officially recorded, but which just last year was documented and much celebrated through the greatest reissue box set of 2013s, Miles Davis' "Live In Europe 1969: The Bootleg Series Vol. 2." In the present, he continues playing in the great piano trio led by Keith Jarrett and also with bassist Gary Peacock, and leads his own groups.

Going artistically strong at 71, he filled us in on the Spring Quartet's work-in-progress and other relevant topics in the undimmed flow of his musical life.

News-Press: There is a lot of excitement around hearing this group with its collection of great players. What was the genesis of this project? How did it come together?

Jack DeJohnette: The genesis is that everybody loves and respects each other, as people and as players. The idea is to just have fun, playing everybody's composition and going into spontaneous improvisations every night, pursuing different things. It's about having a great time. We've had two good concerts, one in Raleigh, North Carolina and one in Washington, D.C. at the Warner Theater, which was really great.



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NP: How far back does this go? Was there a specific birthing moment?

JD: I've played with Leo and with Esperanza. We've all played with each other in different circumstances, but not as an entity with the particular four of us in the same space at the same time. It's a great opportunity for us to get together and make some great music.

The other thing is that keeping up the tradition of older musicians playing with younger musicians, this is a great example of that. We have the generational thing. Although we come from different spaces, we all respect each other's experience when everybody gets on the stage and we're playing the music.

NP: When you did decide to make this happen, was there any kind of a conceptual or stylistic discussion of what it might be or where it might come from?

JD: Not really. It was just "let's get together and play each others' music, and our personalities will come out and meld together." And it already has. It's really a lot of fun. Everybody is remarkable on their instruments. We let the music take us where it will. The key point is having fun.

For me, that's the key element in any of the situations that I'm in — in my group, in my trio and a group with George Colligan, Jerome Harris, and featuring Don Bryon. Then, I have a trio, which will be playing in the summer with Ravi Coltrane and Matthew Garrison (sons of John Coltrane and Jimmy Garrison, respectively).

NP: Aha, so that's a chordless trio, so to speak.

JD: Well, yeah, the bass and the saxophone (laughs). To me, there are chordal instruments. And when Matthew plays that electric bass, he sounds like a piano. We got a lot of chords, or a lot of harmony going on.

NP: I heard your group with Don Byron at the UmeÅ Festival in Sweden. I loved it. I was thinking that part of your artistic make-up involves the fine art of group making, going back to the '70s and New Directions, which played at the Arlington Theatre in Santa Barbara. You don't just settle on traditional notions of instrumentation. Has that been an important creative factor for you over the years?

JD: Yeah. For me, it's about the conversation, with room for everyone to be spotlighted so that the collective energy of everybody comes across. It's not the usual kind of thing with a soloist, a piano and a bassist, say. We have that, but there are also collective improvisations going on as well, which keeps the music fresh and unpredictable.

NP: But, it does seem that you have some original ideas about a group, and what can make up a concept of "groupness."

JD: Yeah, I learned that from Miles. Miles would pick some of the best players, but he also knew that his players respected him and loved him enough that he would get the most out of the players by allowing them the freedom to be themselves, and that's what I do, basically, to try to inspire them. Miles inspired them and they, in turn, inspired him.

You know, you get more out of players when they're in an environment where they know there is trust. Somebody's got your back, and you don't have to worry about whether what you play is right or wrong. It's gonna' work. That is what creates the freedom.

NP: In the case of this group, for instance, obviously all the players are great and there is no question about their artistic confidence, and they are also all leaders in their own right. But I assume that is a democratic organization.

JD: Oh yeah, very much so. We'll change things up. Everybody likes to keep it interesting, keep it fresh, through intuition and talking to one another, making changes or doing this or that. It keeps going on. We're going to be touring quite a bit. We'll keep it interesting.

NP: Will this band continue on after this tour, or is it a limited-time-only operation?

JD: No, we're doing a U.S. tour and then a Europe tour. We're going from the end of January through March and April. We have some time off at the beginning of March, and then doing a tour in Europe at the end of that month.

NP: Is recording in the offing?

JD: Well, we're recording every night, but we haven't thought about that so much. We're just playing the music. There are enough opportunities to record, but our main concern is really just developing this music.

NP: The way you're describing it, this is a band which is evolving and defining itself as it goes, as compared to something with a predetermined path.

JD: Yeah, absolutely.

NP: That's a rare thing in music.

JD: Well, it's kind of the path I've been on since I've been a bandleader, if you think about it. It has just gotten more refined as I've found players who are able to be flexible. We play and we expect the unexpected. We play what we don't know. That's what we're really looking for — playing what we don't know, and playing what we won't ever play again.

NP: And I'm glad you're recording it.

JD: Most artists do that anyway, just to check on how the music is developing.

NP: We're talking about band formats and how bands operate, and I find it amazing that the trio with Keith Jarrett and Gary Peacock is still going, and going strong, after 30 years together. You could say that this is the group with the most standard format, although you never play in a standard way. That may be a built-in irony.

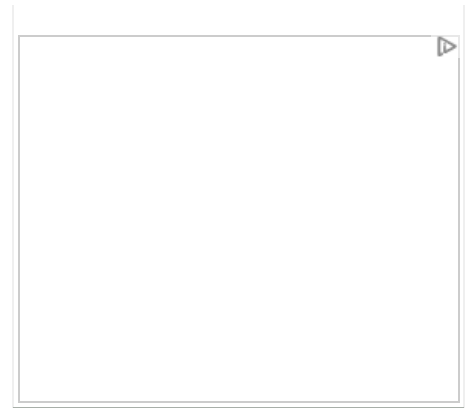
JD: Some of that is, again, being empty when you come to the music and being free enough to follow it where it goes, and make something creative and something that communicates with the audience.

NP: That group obviously thrives on the live context, and most of the albums have been live recordings.

JD: Yeah, I like to record live. The studio is good, too, but there's something else that happens, particularly when you've been out playing for a while. The creative level goes up more. The audience helps stimulate you, too.



The Spring Quartet, an all-star jazz group, includes, from top right, Leo Genovese, Esperanza Spalding, Jack DeJohnette and Joe Lovano. Carlos Pericias, Takou Sato, James Adams and Katz



NP: Is that live focus also the case with the Spring Quartet, as well?

JD: Yeah, you could say that. Another special project that I did last year was for the Chicago Jazz Festival, where I put together a group of masters, with Muhal Richard Abrams, Henry Threadgill, Roscoe Mitchell and Larry Gray. That was fantastic. We recorded and maybe it will see the light of day at some point.

NP: And that took you back to your Chicagoan roots, in a way, didn't it?

JD: Well, yes, in one way, but everybody is playing now. It wasn't nostalgic. It was about where we all are now. That's what was great about it.

NP: Could that possibly come out on your label?

JD: No, my label's not happening anymore. When that happens, it will be announced.

NP: You have recently entered the "seventy-something" age zone, but it seems like you've got as much creative energy and an interest in moving in multiple directions as ever, maybe even more. Do you feel that way? Is this a good period for you?

JD: Yeah, it is, but I'm also in the process of learning how to pace myself, so I'm not burning out. That's a work-in-progress, and I'm leaning how to do it.

NP: Finding balance?

JD: Absolutely. I have to. I'm not 30 years old anymore. I really have to take care of myself so I have my energy and focus. I try to stay healthy and exercise, to be at my best, to play my best.

This is a real exciting group. We're all having a ball. I think it's something for people to look forward to, and we look forward to it. You'll hear it (laughs).

NP: There is a lot of advance curiosity about this band. Often, we'll hear a record or know what we're in for, but this is more of a tabula rasa situation.

JD: Yeah. Everybody plays fantastic and is inspiring each other to greater heights.



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