

Cool Man Cool

Bringing a 'jazz zone' to Prescott would be music to Milt Cannon's ears

By KEN HEDLER | The Daily Courier

Milt Cannon, who has played the saxophone professionally since the age of 15, has emerged as one of the top promoters of jazz appreciation in the tri-city area.

Cannon, 72, said he founded the Prescott Jazz Society in 1993, the same year that he moved to Prescott Valley from Detroit. The organization, which has 140 to 150 people on its mailing list, incorporated in 1994.

"It's for the whole gamut: to educate, to preserve, to promote (jazz)," Cannon said.

Cannon credits three other local musicians with helping to establish a jazz culture here: pianist Ramon Dana, drummer Carlos Jones and bassist Selwyn Reams.

During a recent interview at Community Center Park near his home, Cannon announced another plan to promote jazz. After he returns from a trip to his native Chicago, he said he plans to meet with Prescott Mayor Marlin Kuykendall to discuss establishing a "jazz zone" in downtown Prescott, similar in concept to bars that feature rock bands on Whiskey Row and environs. Under his plan, jazz clubs would be located within walking distance of each other.

"Prescott has the making of the jazz scene," Cannon said. "I want to sell them (city officials) on the fact it will increase the downtown economy. It will enhance tourism, and it is a cultural plus for Arizona."

Kuykendall sounded receptive to the idea.

“Sure, anything that brings more people to the community and spends nights in hotels or wonderful restaurants,” Kuykendall said. “It has got to be a plus.”

Kuykendall said he has known Cannon “forever. Milt has been a friend for years and years, and he is certainly welcome anytime (in the mayor’s office).”

Cannon said he started playing the saxophone while he was in the fifth grade, and performed in his high school and U.S. Army bands.

He listed as his musical influences Stanley Getz, Dexter Gordon and Johnny Griffin.

He noted Chicago also was home to Nat King Cole.

“All of his brothers were musicians,” Cannon said. “They had quite an influence on everybody in the community.”

Cannon studied at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago and later at the University of Colorado and Denver/Metro State, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in 1980.

A member of the American Federation of Musicians off and on for 50 years, Cannon said his career highlight occurred in 1984 when he coordinated the entertainment for the NAACP convention in Denver. Civil rights luminaries attended, including Whitney Young, Jesse Jackson, Benjamin Hooks and Benjamin Mays.

Cannon said the Library of Congress also recorded his musical history.

He said he and his wife, Karen, moved to Prescott Valley because Karen wanted to help out her mother and grandmother, who previously moved here.

During his prime, Cannon said he performed as frequently as seven nights a week. He has scaled down his performances generally to weekends, and can be found playing in the Spirit Lounge of the Hassayampa Inn in Prescott.

He said he generally has played in quartets.

“It’s just a standard, three-piece rhythm section with a horn,” Cannon said.

However, he played in a trio with sax player Erroll Foldes and keyboardist/singer Albert Sarko this past Saturday in The Raven Cafe in Prescott.

His audience included a retired couple who belong to the jazz society and have listened to his music since August: Mary Beth and Roger Lakner of Prescott.

A jazz fan since her childhood, Mary Beth Lakner said she and her husband watch Cannon perform every weekend at the Hassayampa.

She described Cannon’s sax playing as “smooth and easy and natural,” adding Cannon plays by memory. “His music, it is really excellent. That is why we come back.”

Few jazz performers read from sheet music, Cannon explained.

“Jazz is basically an ability to improvise, the essence of jazz,” he said.

Cannon, who owns three saxophones, said good health, a good instructor and an “effective practice

program” are essential to becoming a skilled jazz musician.

Looking back fondly on his life, he said, “I never considered anything (else) as a career. I was drawn to it. It was my calling. I took to it passionately early on.”

For more information about the jazz society, log onto <http://www.pjazz.org/Welcome.html>.