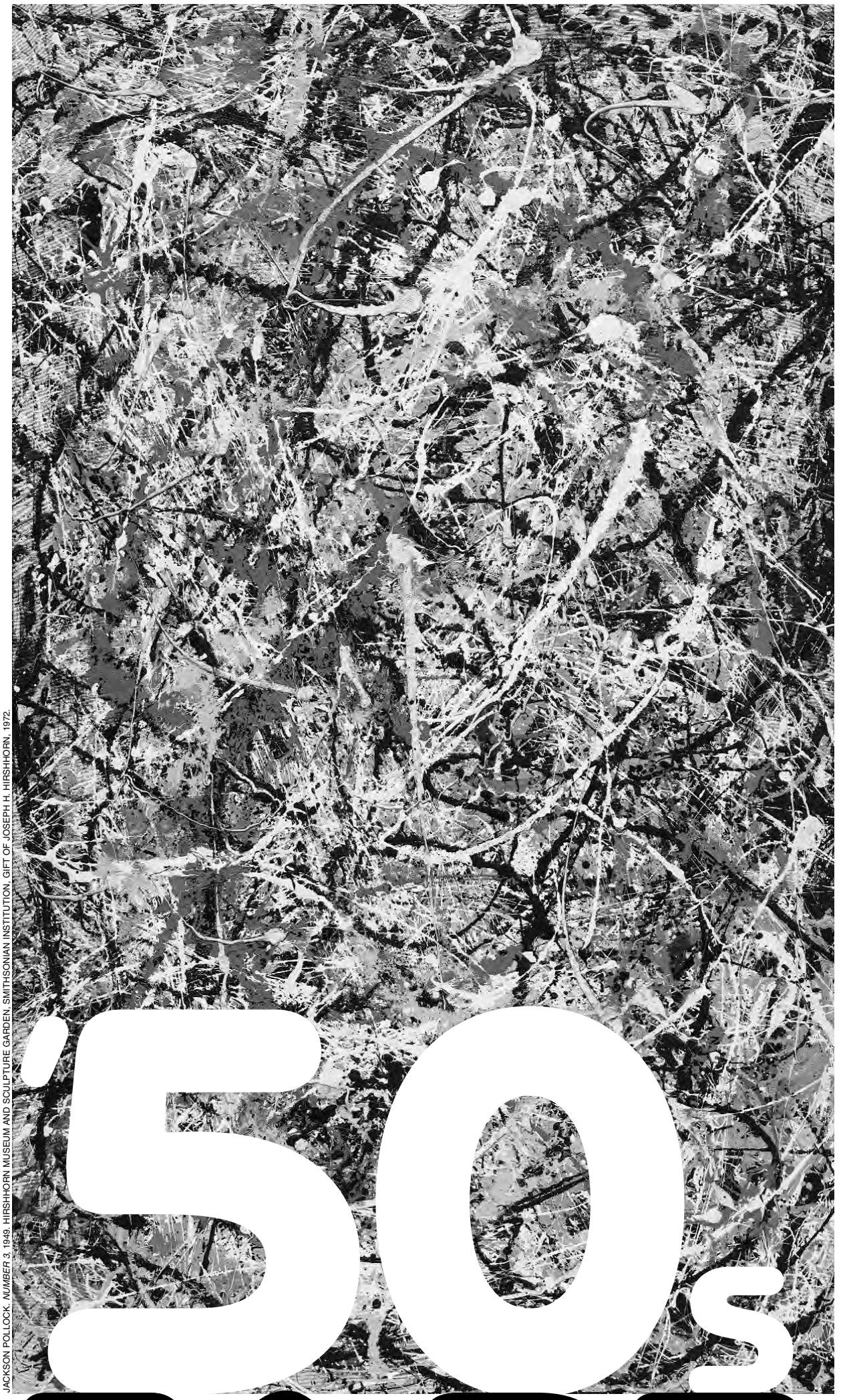

JACKSON POLLOCK. *NUMBER 3*, 1949. HIRSHHORN MUSEUM AND SCULPTURE GARDEN, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, GIFT OF JOSEPH H. HIRSHHORN, 1972.

'50s FARE

OFAM pays tribute to the post-war decade.

BY BRETT CAMPBELL

If you asked most Eugeneans which decade they feel most nostalgic for, I bet a plurality would pick the 1960s. Despite, or probably because of, all its turbulence, that period exploded with the kind of creativity and open-mindedness we probably won't see again in our lifetimes. And what were the Swingin' Sixties rebels rebelling against? Why, the Frumpy Fifties, of course. You know: Bermuda shorts, crewcuts, Pat Boone, the Cold War, Jim Crow laws, McCarthyism. So at first blush, an Oregon Festival of American Music dedicated to the music of the 1950s doesn't seem like a promising match for Eugene.

But as always, pop culture stereotypes can be misleading. For one thing, Country Fair aside, Eugene isn't really a hippie paradise, as our Chamber of Commerce mayor and milltown heritage repeatedly demonstrate. For another, the '60s saw its fair share of conformity, conservatism, and crooners. Remember who the president of the U.S. and governor of California were in the latter part of the decade, and take a look at the pop charts and TV shows of the period.

Likewise, 1950s America cultivated its own corners of cool: San Francisco's Beat poets and writers; New York's Abstract Expressionist painters; the still unsurpassed post-bop jazz masters; the emergence of soul, rhythm & blues, and doo wop music; the folk revival riding the mighty wind of the Weavers and others; and, of course, the birth of that minor cultural phenomenon called rock and roll. And the list goes on. In fact, a pantheon of 1950s cultural colossi (from Miles Davis to Jackson Pollock to Allen Ginsberg to Marlon Brando to the original Sun Records artists to Tom Lehrer, Lenny Bruce and Lord Buckley) might ultimately stand taller in history's eventual estimation than the accumulated height of all the '60s stars.

Despite all its downsides (from the decline of contemporary classical and "art" music to institutional racism to the Korean War), enough cool stuff was happening in the 1950s to make OFAM's summer extravaganza — a dozen major concerts, a fully staged musical, films, lectures, and more — worth sampling.

Of course, there's no way to come close to covering the musical richness of any decade in 11 days, and given OFAM Music Director Dick Hyman's characteristic predilection for the pallid pop of the period, this is hardly my ideal '50s lineup, which would doubtless contain more Mingus, Miles, Monk, and Memphis, not to mention Art Blakey and Lenny Bruce and Clifford Brown, John Cage and Sam Cooke, Johnny Cash, Patsy Cline and Ray Charles ….

Everyone will have a list of personal favorites, and Hyman's is certainly historically valid. OFAM vets will appreciate the return of first-class musicians like trumpeter Byron Stripling, guitarist Mike Denny, drummer Alan Tarpinian, saxist Matt Shevitz, vocalist Lenanne Sylvester and the rest, as well as figures from the period like guitarist Al Caiola and percussionist Frank Capp.

I especially recommend this year's free fare. Anyone who's heard jazz scholar Carl Woidek in his wonderful jazz show on KLCC or in previous lectures knows to expect informed insights, this time in free talks on cool jazz and hard bop, and the birth of rock and roll. Another great local musician and musical authority, Steve Stone, will take us on a tour of some of the San Francisco venues where the seeds of the '60s were being sown. UO professors Janet Wasko and Daniel Pope will provide some historical pop cultural context, and if we can't have the funniest songwriter ever, Tom Lehrer, himself, it'll be nice to hear an expert in his musical hilarity.

The free movies this year are an especially compelling crop, including among others one of the funniest comedies (*Some Like It Hot*), tautest thrillers (*Vertigo*), and, just in time to pay respects to Brando, *On the Waterfront* and its magnificent Leonard Bernstein score. Setting art and music in context is what OFAM does best, and this summer's festival will encourage us to take a fresh look at a decade that's worth reconsidering and enjoying — even for the tie-dyed among us.