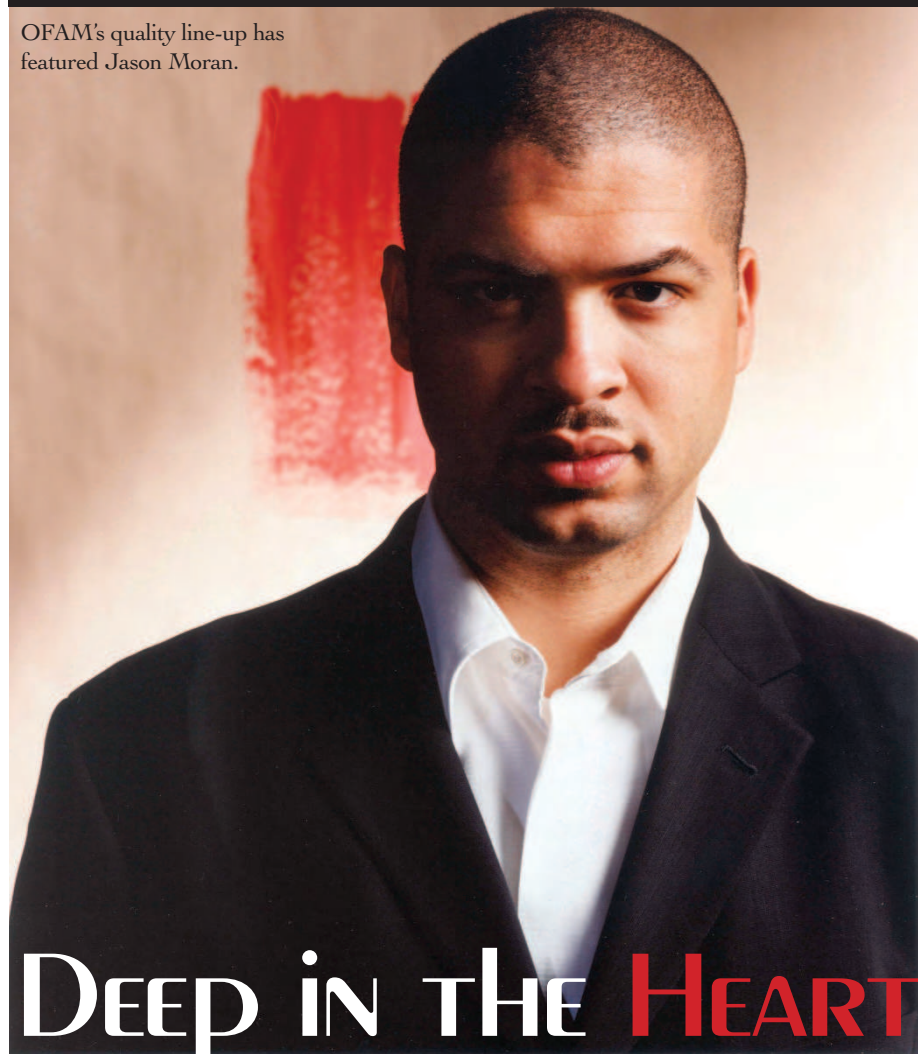


OFAM's quality line-up has featured Jason Moran.



DEEP IN THE HEART

The Shedd brings musical vitality to downtown Eugene.

BY BRETT CAMPBELL

The past year or so has brought a flowering of musical beauty to downtown Eugene, driven in large part by new or revitalized venues like the McDonald Theater, Luna, Sam Bond's, and perennial stalwarts like the WOW Hall and Café Paradiso, Hult Center and UO.

But amid that explosion of musical energy, Eugene's live music story of the year — maybe the decade — has incontestably been the emergence of The Shedd, in the heart of downtown, as a beacon of strong traditional, classical, and especially jazz-oriented music and education. I don't know what the spirits

of the Baptists who used to inhabit the space think, but acoustically and size-wise, the former Baptist church is a great venue for jazz and other acoustic music, and it's going to get better as improvements continue.

Oregon Festival of American Music Executive Director James Ralph, who runs the Shedd operation, sees the venue as "a quality performing arts center that focuses on cultural events rather than entertainment." Continuing, Ralph says, "OFAM's own work at The Shedd will focus on high quality concerts, cultural and educational events and classes that fit our educational and cultural

We are working at overcoming the 'ghettoization' of performing arts . . .

— JAMES Q. RALPH —

mission. We are attempting to create a 'cultural community center' feel rather than a party or club feel, but at the same time we would like it to be accessible to patrons." OFAM plans to rent the facility to other cultural and service organizations whose goals are consistent with its mission.

The Shedd's main asset is that its booking demonstrates uncanny good taste, choosing musicians who combine accessibility with artistic integrity and contemporary vitality. That perspicacity comes from the vision OFAM has maintained for a dozen years: "We actively champion American and 20th (and 21st) century music of all kinds — academic, 'art music,' popular music, folk music," Ralph explains. "We are working at overcoming the 'ghettoization' of performing arts and cultural experiences that is so common to our industry."

The staff, including Ralph and Erik Martin, invests a lot of thought and research to find artists whose music advances those goals, and to these ears, they've been remarkably successful, particularly in jazz programming. Ralph hopes to eventually host top-quality local performers as well.

The Shedd has also continued OFAM's pre-*O Brother* commitment to American roots music, bringing successful shows by dobro-meister Jerry Douglas and country legend Dwight Yoakam, Celtic fiddlers Natalie MacMaster and Alasdair Fraser, bluegrass star Tim O'Brien, songwriting legend Guy Clark, and more, including Randy Newman, whose roots in pre-rock popular music made his appearance an unexpected yet natural fit. In all these performers, you can feel the sense of American musical history that OFAM has striven so mightily to bring to the surface over the past decade.

To be sure, the Shedd's success and financial resources, like OFAM's before it,

have occasioned a bit of resentment among its competitors in both the nonprofit and for-profit areas here. And the recent demise of the Wild Duck may portend a greater shakeout in the live music biz downtown. Ralph is unapologetic, seeing the operation as a business that trades in art, working hard to find worthwhile acts, many of whom wouldn't even think of playing Eugene if not for the Shedd and its relatively deep pockets.

"We do not belittle the creative power of money," Ralph explains. "We just assert that we haven't been unfair in our business practices and that there is far more to our strengths (or weaknesses) than how much capital we work with."

Not that it has unlimited resources. The building purchase and current remodels (plus the two new Steinway pianos) were funded through loans, which must be repaid through income from rentals, tickets and so on. Someday, OFAM may even own the building. And OFAM can also rely on donors, sponsors and granting agencies for help in making tickets cheaper for kids and families, and avoiding the perils of lowest-common denominator programming in order to pay the bills. The Shedd's commitment to youth music education, particularly valuable now with the cuts in arts and music education in the public schools, is perhaps as valuable as its concerts.

As the institution's physical transformation nears completion and the operation hits its stride, we can expect even more musical treasures to emerge from Broadway and High streets. But already, the Shedd's powerful artistic vision has sparked a welcome resurgence of musical, educational, and cultural interest downtown. That benefits just about everyone who loves great music and a strong city center. **EW**

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