

# June Jazz

Frisell, Mehldau lead parade of jazz greats

School's out and jazz is in this month. On Saturday, May 31, at Sam Bond's, the frenetic Seattle-based tenor saxman Skerik leads **Skerik's Maelstrom Trio** with Brian Coogan at the Hammond B-3 and Simon Lott on drums. The threesome, just back from playing the annual New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival, will no doubt add some of Skerik's trademark accessible abandon to the classic organ trio's funk-soul-groove brew. Don't be late: Trombonist/pianist/composer Steve Moore, who plays with Skerik in Seattle's always exciting Syncopated Taint Septet (and who's played with Laura Veirs, Sufjan Stevens, Bill Frisell and more), opens the show with his terrific current band, **Stebmo**. Its debut album features woodwinds and Eyvind Kang's viola as well as a strong jazz rhythm section in music of real depth, even when the surface seems placid.

The Seattle invasion continues on June 3, when award winning jazz hornist (and yes, he plays an actual French horn) and composer **Tom Varner** performs at Cozmic Pizza with local jazzers **Idit Shner** (who teaches at the UO), **Josh Tower** and **Ryan Biesack**. Like Bill Frisell, Varner moved to Seattle after making his name in New York's fabled downtown creative music scene, including at the Knitting Factory, performing with greats such as Lee Konitz, Steve Lacy and Kenny Barron and adventurous contemporary players like John Zorn and Bobby Previte.

Seattle's greatest musician, and one of the finest anywhere, returns to the Shedd on June 7. This time, guitar great **Bill Frisell** leads a trio with Kang and drummer Rudy Royston. I could fill this column with the names of jazz and rock stars whose albums Frisell has graced. In an age of outstanding jazz guitarists, Frisell has transcended genre, blending folk and American roots influences to create some of the most sumptuously beautiful yet exploratory music of our time, music that owes as much to texture and tone as much as fleet-fingered virtuosity. Attendance is mandatory at just about any Frisell show.

But save some bucks for another unmissable Shedd show two days earlier, when pianist extraordinaire **Brad Mehldau** leads his current trio, featuring Larry Grenadier and Jeff Ballard. Easily one of contemporary jazz's most esteemed musicians despite his relative youth, Mehldau takes listeners on a fascinating sonic journey, whether he's playing a jazz standard, using a rock track by Radiohead or Beck as a point of departure or unveiling one of his increasingly accomplished originals. Yet for all his introspective immersion in each song's musical voyage and sometimes architectural improvisational structures, Mehldau always finds emotional connections; at his last Shedd show, his gorgeous version of Paul McCartney's "She's Leaving Home" brought tears to my eyes, his interpretation somehow reaching deeper than its original inspiration.

A rising young jazz star, pianist **Ben Darwish**, returns to Eugene after turning quite a few heads during his UO career a few years ago. Darwish is now winning deserved acclaim on the hot Portland jazz



scene with his jazzy trio and with his new guitar-and-vocals quartet, **Commotion**, which plays Jo Federigo's June 6. As you'd expect in a band of twentysomethings, this band incorporates plenty of contemporary influences, including electronic beats and traces of hip hop, '70s funk, even reggae. On June 4, Jo Fed's hosts the CD release party of another promising young quintet, **Poisonous Birds**, with trumpeter Josh Deutsch, saxophonist Hashem Assadullahi, pianist Jeff Lovell, bassist Dorian McIntyre-Crow and drummer Kevin Congleton. The group, whose members have worked with the likes of Frisell and Dave Douglas, draws on Balkan, rock and reggae music as well as more traditional jazz influences.

Speaking of promising youngsters, this is the closing stretch of the UO's music season. Top recommendations include the wonderful women's a capella group **Divisi's** spring concert and CD (their third) release party at First United Methodist Church June 7; the June 5 choral concert at Beall Concert Hall featuring two **UO singing groups** in plenty of contemporary (Arvo Pärt, James MacMillan, etc) and classic music; the **UO Percussion Ensemble** June 8 (Music Building 163) in music by Chris Rouse and more; and the ever popular **gospel blowout** on June 8 at Beall.

Finally, she's no jazzier, but four-time Tony Award winner **Audra McDonald**, who plays the Shedd May 31, is one of the finest singers around, not to mention a terrific actress on stage and now small screen. Her most recent album departs from show tunes as she covers songs by Elvis Costello, Nellie McKay, Randy Newman, Neil Young, Rufus Wainwright and other contemporary popsters. Whether she's performing opera, classical, pop or Broadway tunes, McDonald is a sincere, charismatic and impassioned advocate for the music — a real star who deserves her celebrity. **EW**

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