

Ellis Marsalis: Likely Never to Play Portland Again

Saturday show will feature son, Jason, Devin Phillips

By Brian Stimson

This weekend, the Soul'd Out Music Festival will conclude with a performance by pianist and jazz master Ellis Marsalis, the man responsible for the Marsalis family jazz legacy that includes sons Branford, Wynton, Delfeayo and Jason. Last week, *The Skanner News* spoke with the pianist from his home in New Orleans.

Ellis, now retired from teaching at the University of New Orleans, still plays a weekly show in New Orleans, but says that his performances during this tour will likely be his last away from Louisiana. This year, the Marsalis family

received the first NEA Jazz Masters group award for their accomplishments in the genre. Ellis is also serving as a consultant to the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music, which features performance halls and education spaces for residents at Musicians Village and others in the neighborhood.

Marsalis will play this Saturday with his son Jason at the Aladdin Theatre in Portland, with an opening set by the Devin Phillips Quartet.

The Soul'd Out Music Festival continues all this week with performances from a number of national soul, jazz and hip hop acts including Das Racist, Dr. Lonnie Smith, Tinie Tempah,

Rusko, Trentemoller, Breakestra, Mos Def and more. Check www.souldoutfestival.com for a full schedule of events

The Skanner News: You're about to embark on a multi-city tour going from Portland to San Francisco coming up here in the next...

Ellis Marsalis: I wouldn't exactly call it a tour going from Portland Oregon to San Francisco ... I don't really do touring per se, it's not something I can really do. In fact, in February, my wife broke her hip and I was close to having to cancel the little bit of something I had to be at home trying to help her with her rehab. As



Ellis, on right, with his son, Branford.

it is, I did cancel the workshop I was going to do the following day because as it is, it's taking me out of town for too many days.

TSN: Do you tend to still play a lot of live shows in your home of New Orleans?

EM: I do once a week at a club called Snug Harbor.

TSN: What does your set look like these days, when you're playing in New Orleans or traveling to a place such as Portland?

EM: Well, I usually play as much as possible with my son Jason. I have a young saxophonist that I play with. This particular time, he's not available, so I'm going to ask Jason to play vibraphone, which he's getting better and better at. We'll be doing some Thelonius Monk music. Some things I'd normally be doing with a saxophone player, except Jason will be doing vibes.

TSN: Are you still actively writing music?

EM: I do a little. I've been working on some spirituals. I had over a period of time, I had actually composed, I don't know if the correct term is composed or arranged, some of the old negro spirituals, sort of modernized the harmonic approach to that. There's some things I want to finish. I may do some composition originals in the future. I've started on a piece by R. Nathaniel Dett, from *In the Bottoms* suite, but I haven't gone back to that, cause I want to finish some things that have been languishing for a while.

TSN: What is it that you're finishing?

EM: There's one piece that I'm arranging which is a piece for solo piano, but I'm doing it for piano and cello. And the cellist is the director of a string quartet in residence at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts Riverfront. And I promised I'd do something. It's a short piece.

TSN: Tell me a bit about the Ellis Marsalis Center for Music at Musicians Village. Are you active in the project or playing benefit shows?

EM: There's a lot of yes and no's in that. The building is basically complete. Um, I am functioning more like a consultant, which I'm glad of. There's a director who's currently looking to do the day-to-day operations. It hasn't officially opened as yet. As of now, the center has been asked to partner with an elementary

school, called the Desire Street Ministries Charter School, to provide music education, which is located in the vicinity of the center. We're sort of working on that now, how we gonna do it, where the kids are gonna be, how much of it at the center, how much at the school ... the logistics of something that is coming to fruition that has no history.

TSN: Do you pay a lot of attention to the state of music education in New Orleans Public Schools?

EM: No, cause there's never been much music education in New Orleans, except there were some very good band directors who were the sole persons doing things. A lot of people came under the tutelage of these very good band directors. Some went into music professionally and some didn't. When it came down to it, there's never really been any music education in the system. The closest thing was the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts and there was a lot of political jealousy involved with that.

TSN: I'm curious how the jazz club scene has changed over the last five years or so. Do you see it reviving itself to pre-Katrina intensity? Or has it changed completely?

EM: It hasn't changed much at all. I think, if anything, what the difference is, most of all the music shifted from Bourbon Street to Frenchmen Street. And there's only one consistently modern jazz space, which is Snug Harbor, which I play Friday nights. Now there are some other spaces that occasionally have a group come in and play modern-type music, but other than that, I haven't seen much of a difference at all.

TSN: Last year, you released an album, "Music Redeems," which many of your sons. I'm curious what it's like working with your sons. Whether it's easier or harder because they're your family?

EM: All of the sons who do play, they play on a pretty high professional level. When you get on the bandstand, it becomes all about the music, it doesn't become about anything else other than that. And we do, whenever we get a chance to play all of us together, sometimes we do some of my pieces, but between us, we know a lot of earlier jazz musicians, we can do that.

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