

The joy of sax: New Yorker dives into Seattle jazz scene | Free concert Jan. 9

By [NEAL MCNAMARA](#)

Federal Way Mirror Reporter

Dec 30 2010, 4:39 PM · **UPDATED**

The Seattle area is not known for its jazz scene — not like New York, New Orleans, Chicago or Kansas City, even.

But ignore that for a second. The Puget Sound does have a scene. It's diverse, small — compared to more jazz-associated cities — and growing. And we have jazz roots: Ray Charles recorded an early hit here; John Coltrane made “Live in Seattle” and “Om” here.

Brooks Giles, a saxophonist and vocalist with 22 years in the New York scene, moved to Seattle's Ballard neighborhood last March. He's an established player, having studied with the likes of Jimmy Heath and Reggie Workman. He toured Asia for five years with the late Eldee Young.

Giles has been playing at clubs, restaurants and casinos around the region. On Jan. 9, he and his band — comprising local jazz musicians, all of whom, consequently, are also not from the area — will play a [Jazz LIVE concert at the Marine View Church, just over the Federal Way line in Tacoma.](#)

Giles will play a couple of his original compositions, plus some standards and cuts from his newest album, “Romance De Los Andes,” which was recorded during a sojourn in Chile.

Giles has a range of influences. He and his band can pull off virtually anything from the jazz universe, from straight bebop to Afro-Cuban.

Giles is from Frankfort, Ky., and first picked up a sax at 10. He started singing in his local church's choir. His mother was a vocalist and pianist and helped him along as a musician. His uncle was Vance E. Wilson, a saxophonist who — aside from having a career that started in the 1940s and included stints with Chris Powell and Little Richard — was a friend to Count Basie and the musicians in his orchestra.

When Count Basie and his Orchestra came through Frankfort, Giles got to see them up close.

“The saxophone section really appealed to me,” he said. “They were improvising. Eventually, when I tried to do the same thing, I found out, boy, it's not easy. It takes a lot of work, a lot of study. It was a great challenge.”

He left Kentucky after high school and went to Ohio State University in Columbus. But he finished his schooling in New York City, attending the exceptional jazz programs at The New School and Queens College (where he got a graduate degree). He absorbed a lot of influences, like Workman's avant garde style. And studying under Heath and Dr. Donald Byrd was a firsthand experience with two of the architects of the art of bebop.



“Being in the moment of the performance at all times,” he said of what Workman taught him. “He used to talk about transmitting as opposed to performing. In other words, you’re there, you’re in the moment, you’ve learned how to play your instrument, but you’re able to receive the energy and let the music flow through you freely.”

He formed the Brooks Giles Quartet in 1989, just the beginning of a diverse career. He was a band leader at public schools in Brooklyn. In 1993, he started a year-long tour of Europe with the Broadway musical “Bubbling Brown Sugar.” Between 1995 and 2000, he toured Asia with double bass player Young, and stayed in the region and toured as a band leader in places like Singapore, Malaysia, Burma and China. He appeared in Woody Allen’s “Sweet and Lowdown,” about an egomaniac jazz guitar virtuoso.

Asia, outside of Japan, is another place you don’t immediately associate with jazz. But the audiences love jazz, Giles said, and they know the sub-genres. He remembers seeing a Burger King in Seoul that was decorated with Blue Note Records album covers.

But Asia is still, literally, a foreign place for jazz. In Malaysia, government censors screened Giles’ lyrics for profanity. They were playing jazz standards and some Bill Withers covers — you know, the artist who made such gratuitous songs as “Lean On Me.”

“The government had to make sure there was nothing ultra offensive,” he said. “We take artistic freedom for granted.”

Giles has noticed some differences between New York’s scene and Seattle’s. It’s a bit harder to find unconventional styles like rollicking funk or outer space experimentation. Giles said he’s noticed that jazz is sometimes treated more like background music here. But he’s here to play, anyway. Also, there’s a lot more rain, and no subway system.

He plays at a weekly jam session at the Owl’n Thistle in downtown Seattle, and teaches at Seattle Central Community College with his friend, drummer Brian Kirk. He’s also met a group of musicians he likes playing with. For Jazz LIVE, he assembled local players Osama Afifi on bass, Eugene Bien on keyboards and Jose Martinez on drums. He’s bringing in Hui Cox, a Brooklynite originally from Baltimore, as a special guest on guitar. And that’s another difference from New York: with these players, the band has the option to perform various styles in one sitting.

“The reason I work with these people is because they’re flexible to do all styles of music,” he said. “That’s important with what I do. We can do anything from reggae to rhythms and blues to jazz; we can do it and be true to that form of music. That’s what might make us different.”

“Our job as musicians is to cater to our surroundings,” Giles said. “It doesn’t matter if it’s Seattle, Beijing, Hong Kong or Chile. We’re there for the audience, anyway.”

He’s looking forward to Jazz LIVE, saying that he wants to take his music wherever he can.

“Bring the kids. It’ll be fun for the whole family. The musicians in the group are some of the finest around.”

Giles is serious that it’ll be a family friendly show, especially since it’s in a church. If his stuff can pass Malaysian government censors, it’s safe for such holy confines.

Free concert

Jazz LIVE featuring the Brooks Giles Band will run 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Jan. 9 at Marine View Presbyterian Church, 8469 Eastside Drive Northeast, Tacoma. Visit www.marineviewpc.org or www.BrooksGiles.com.

Federal Way Mirror Reporter Neal McNamara can be reached at nmcnamara@federalwaymirror.com or 253-925-5565 ext. 5054.