

Music

Sax man/flutist fills in the spaces

Mark Lewis comes to San Jose with new music under his arm

By Andrew Gilbert

Correspondent

Mark Lewis never crossed paths with Baseball Hall of Famer Wee Willie Keeler, who died some three decades before the saxophonist/flutist was born in 1958.

But as much as any jazz musician on the scene, Lewis has thrived by minding the diminutive outfielder's motto to "keep your eye on the ball and hit 'em where they ain't."

A prolific composer, resourceful entrepreneur, dedicated educator and highly lyrical alto saxophonist and flutist, Lewis learned to find opportunities where others feared to tread. For instance, during the 17 years he spent based in the Netherlands, he didn't let a little cold weather keep him from making the rounds in Scandinavia.

"No one wanted to play in Sweden in the winter, but I didn't mind," says Lewis, who makes a rare Bay Area appearance Thursday at Café Stritch with pianist Eddie Mendenhall, bassist John Wiitala, and drummer Jason Lewis. "I'd play anywhere. I'm always happy when I come to a town when there's no jazz. I'll go and find a club and bring some music in."

Bay Area jazz fans of a certain age might remember Lewis from the early 1980s, when landed in San Francisco for about a year in the midst of his European sojourn. While liv-



COURTESY OF MARK LEWIS

Saxophonist and flutist Mark Lewis makes a rare return to the Bay Area for a Thursday show at Cafe Stritch in San Jose.

ing in Rotterdam, he had launched the Audio Daddio label, which documented leading European players like bassist Hein van de Geyn and expat and touring American jazz greats like drummer Philly Joe Jones and tenor saxophonist Clifford Jordan.

Wherever he toured, he brought a stack of records to sell, and when he arrived in the Bay Area, he made the rounds with LPs under his arm, garnering airplay for his releases on radio station KJAZ. His first Bay Area band featured drummer Glenn Cronkhite, pianist Mark Little and bassist Harley White (who also anchored the trio of piano legend Earl "Fatha" Hines at the time). When Lewis couldn't find gigs in clubs, "we played on the streets," he recalls.

"I did a college tour with the trumpeter Al Hood's trio doing all original music. It was fun, but they were a little too free for my taste. I was trying to do music that would introduce one feeling at a time into the musical stream, not all at once."

Now based in his home-

town Bremerton, Washington, Lewis once again arrives in the Bay Area with a new album in tow, "New York Session" (Audio Daddio). An all-star project featuring piano great George Cables, veteran bassist Essiet Essiet, and the supremely swinging drummer Victor Lewis, it's a vivid collection of his melodically charged originals, tunes inspired mostly by friends and fellow musicians.

Something of a cult figure, Lewis has gained some high-profile fans, like pianist, jazz historian and Daily Beast columnist Ted Gioia, who writes in the album's liner notes, "There's so much to savor and admire here: Lewis' musicality, his inventiveness, his humor, his ability to immerse himself in the soundscape of the performance with total emotional commitment."

An enthusiastic conversationalist, Lewis can introduce five interesting ideas before an interviewer has the chance to slow him down. Though he says he'd run into the "New York Session" musicians over

MARK LEWIS QUARTET

When: 8:30 p.m. Thursday

Where: Café Stritch, 374 S. 1st St., San Jose

Tickets: free; 408-280-6161, www.cafestritch.com

the years, he didn't share a lot of musical history, and that shaped his choice of tunes. Another factor was his limited eye sight. Legally blind since childhood, he wanted to make sure that everyone was on the same creative page.

"I don't see well enough to see facial expressions," Lewis said. "I used simple compositions because I didn't want to clutter the purity of the sound we were trying to get."

Always seeking to connect with audiences, Lewis makes a powerful impression wherever he lands. As a young player starting out on the Seattle scene in the mid-1970s, he caught the ear of veteran players, like Otis "Candy" Finch, a well-traveled drummer who recorded memorable sessions with organist Shirley Scott and worked regularly with Dizzy Gillespie.

Finch took Lewis under his wing and got him to get out of the Pacific Northwest and head to Europe. In Rotterdam, he landed his first gig with the help of tenor sax titan Johnny Griffin.

"I was really lucky to play with some granddaddies of the music," Lewis says.

Now he's one of the old-school masters, a player who has thrived as a creative force by making opportunities for himself and finding spaces neglected by his peers.

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