



Entertainment

Jazz Visionary

Saxophonist/flutist/composer Mark Lewis performs at The Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach on Saturday, Jan. 2

by Michael Hixon

Mark Lewis started listening to music when he was in the womb.

According to the accomplished saxophone player and flutist, his love for music comes from his mother who would attend jazz and other concerts before he was born. She even took him to shows when he was a baby.

"I was blind from the time I was born until I was 2 years old and then it took me another three years to see because I had to learn how to see," recalled Lewis, who had several surgeries for congenital cataracts from six months old to 2 years old. "(My mother) said I used to get out of the crib and walk on the windowsill. One time I fell into the flower bed and she didn't know where I was."

Lewis' mother would let him spin her old 78 RPM records when he was 4 years old. He would sit and stare at the records by Charlie Parker, Ella Fitzgerald, Lester Young and many others.

"That was my entertainment," he said. "I couldn't see the TV."

Lewis, who is legally blind, has composed approximately 1,700 songs, recorded hit albums and performed with some of the top musicians in the world. Lewis, who also has his own label Audio Daddy, performs Saturday, Jan. 2, from 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., at The Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach, along with pianist Ron Kobayashi, bassist Baba Elefante and drummer Steve Dixon.

Lewis first picked up a saxophone, his grandfather's (Ray Street) C melody sax, when he was 9 years old. And at 10 years old he began playing his uncle's old sax.

"I found an E-flat alto in a pawn shop. It was a pretty good one. I wish I still had it. I wonder how good it really was. I traded it in for a little better one. Finally I got a professional horn in high school and started playing in the big bands there."

In high school, while playing in school jazz and concert ensembles, he started to gravitate to improvisational musicians such as Charles

Mingus and Dave Brubeck, whom he grew up listening to on those 78s.

"I started to realize at a very young age that it wasn't the instrument, it was the person behind the instrument," Lewis said. "That's what I like about listening to improvisation, is that you're listening to the person. You really are listening to the voice of the person who's playing it."

Lewis formed his first band in high school and continued that while attending Western Washington University, where he said there was "too much big band." He also went to The Cornish Institute of Allied Arts, where he could concentrate on performing with smaller groups. Gary Peacock, who taught advanced music theory, suggested that he didn't need a degree, so he left college and played around Seattle. He began playing with veteran musicians like Candy Finch, who was Dizzy Gillespie's drummer, and became part of Norm Bobrow's Jazz at the Cirque.

It was Finch who encouraged Lewis to move to Europe in 1978.

"I took his advice and saved some money," Lewis said. "I went to Holland on a one-way ticket, with \$500 in my pocket."

Lewis had an inauspicious introduction to Holland when he took the wrong bus when he arrived. Thinking he was heading to Amsterdam, he ended up in Rotterdam. Three days after arriving, someone finally told him he was in the wrong town. He got on the train and landed in Amsterdam.

He stayed in hotels with the money he still had left and tried to find gigs because he was not allowed to play on the streets. He finally found a place to practice, after getting into trouble for playing in a fish warehouse that smelled bad, in the basement of a flat. Some Italian musicians on the fourth floor heard him play so they invited him to join. He stayed with them for a month before finding a new place, but the landlady cheated him out of his money and his room. With a few dollars left, he headed back to Rotterdam and met up with the one person he new — a woman who's boyfriend was jazz musician Noah Howard.

Lewis stayed at their apartment and eventually toured Europe with Howard. Lewis

said "he taught me about the arts and life in general." They eventually split, but Lewis continued on for years in Europe where he formed his own bands, including the Mark Lewis Quartet, the Mark Lewis Trio and the Mark Lewis International Quintet, playing with local musicians wherever he traveled.

He also started his own record company. His first album was a demo, which he gave to Columbia Records.

"They wanted me to sign to the label if I would change my music ... it was very commercial music, something to the nature of what Kenny G does. That's fine, people can enjoy that all they want, but it wasn't my music," Lewis said.

Lewis was scheduled to play and record with trumpeter Chet Baker, who was one of a number of jazz legends who performed and recorded at The Lighthouse in the 1950s. When he arrived in Amsterdam, he learned from Baker's agent that Baker had died while he was in midair. Baker had a long history of drug problems.

"He spent all of his money on (drugs), and when he went back into his hotel room it was locked because he hadn't paid his bill," Lewis said. "He had taped his drugs underneath the drawer so he wanted to get into the dresser drawer. So he's trying to climb up the pipe, the drain pipe that would lead up to his room, it was a water pipe. The water pipe came apart ... he fell backwards onto the street ... it wasn't that he jumped or was pushed."

While he tragically missed an opportunity to play with one of his musical heroes, Lewis recorded "In the Spirit," released in 1990, with saxophonist Stan Getz on Quartet Records. The record reached the top 40 on the jazz charts and sold more than 900,000 copies.

Lewis moved back to the United States in 1994 and now makes his home in Bremerton, Wash., where he teaches privately and still operates his studio, Audio Daddy. Through teaching and encouraging music students to see live performances, Lewis hopes to keep the spirit of jazz alive because he feels the art form is "disregarded in this country."

"If we're not careful it will be gone because



Mark Lewis, who is legally blind, has been playing the sax since he was 9 years old.

players like me are the links between the old and the new and the younger players have to be able to go hang out with us and to play and hear firsthand because there is nothing like listening to jazz first hand ... it's the difference between a photograph and the real thing.

"We play until we can't play any more. When you see a jazz musician that stops playing, chances are he'll be dead in a year."

The Lighthouse is located at 30 Pier Ave.

For more information, visit marklewismusic.com or thelighthousecafe.net.