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Generations of Jazz

Like father, like son: Grammy-nominated tenor sax virtuoso Donny McCaslin reflects on his Santa Cruz roots

By Liz Barrett

If you lived in Santa Cruz before 1989, it's practically guaranteed that you have fond memories of beautiful summer afternoons with the sound of Don McCaslin's breezy **vibes** wafting from the outdoor café at the Cooper House all through the Pacific Garden Mall. McCaslin's Latin-flavored jazz band, Warmth, was "the heartbeat of downtown," and songs like "Praise Poems" and "C Jam Blues" were the *al fresco* soundtrack.

The Loma Prieta earthquake put an end to that. The Cooper House was demolished, along with James McFarlin's mural of Warmth that served as a backdrop for the band's daily performances all those years.

It was the end of an era, but not the end of jazz. The Santa Cruz Jazz Festival marks its 26th year March 16-17 at the new facilities at Cabrillo College in Aptos. The Santa Cruz Jazz Society, which hosts a four-hour open jam session every Sunday at Bocci's Cellar, lists more than 200 local jazz musicians in its

directory. So even though things change, jazz is still alive and well here.


Warmth disbanded in 2010 after playing at the Wharf House in Capitola for twenty years, but McCaslin — who has been playing in Santa Cruz since the late 1940s and is now 84 — still plays at Severino's in Aptos every Thursday night with his current band, the Amazing Jazz Geezers. McCaslin stopped lugging around his heavy vibraphone after he had hip surgery, so he plays just the piano with the Geezers. The band "has a prerequisite for membership," McCaslin's son Donny wrote in the program notes for his own quartet's performance at Ohio State University last March. "You have to be at least 70 years old and know 1,000 tunes."

Donny should know. The Grammy-nominated tenor sax virtuoso, who won Downbeat's Rising Star poll in 2008 and 2009,

played with his father since he was a kid. He's now a major player in the international jazz scene, but he still sits in with the Geezers whenever he's in town. It's something he has cherished since his parents divorced when he was a child, and he saw his dad just once a week.

"That day was spent setting up his equipment, watching the band members arrive, then sitting on a chair in the bandstand and listening to them for four or five hours," Donny wrote. He loved the time with his dad, and he loved hearing the eclectic blend of music that was such a part of Central Coast jazz at the time. "They'd play a mixture of Great American Songbook jazz classics, Cal Tjader-esque Latin jazz, and R&B numbers like

The jazz band Warmth, with (L-R) Brad Hecht, Jim Baum and Don McCaslin at the Cooper House in Santa Cruz.

A photograph of Donny McCaslin performing on stage. He is wearing a dark blue long-sleeved shirt and tan trousers, and is playing a tenor saxophone. In the background, another musician is visible playing a red electric bass. The stage is lit with purple and blue lights.

Donny McCaslin performs with
The Donny McCaslin Group,
featuring Fima Ephron, electric
bass, at the Monterey Jazz
Festival in 2011.

Photo: ©Cole Thompson/Monterey Jazz Festival

Photo: ©David Singletary

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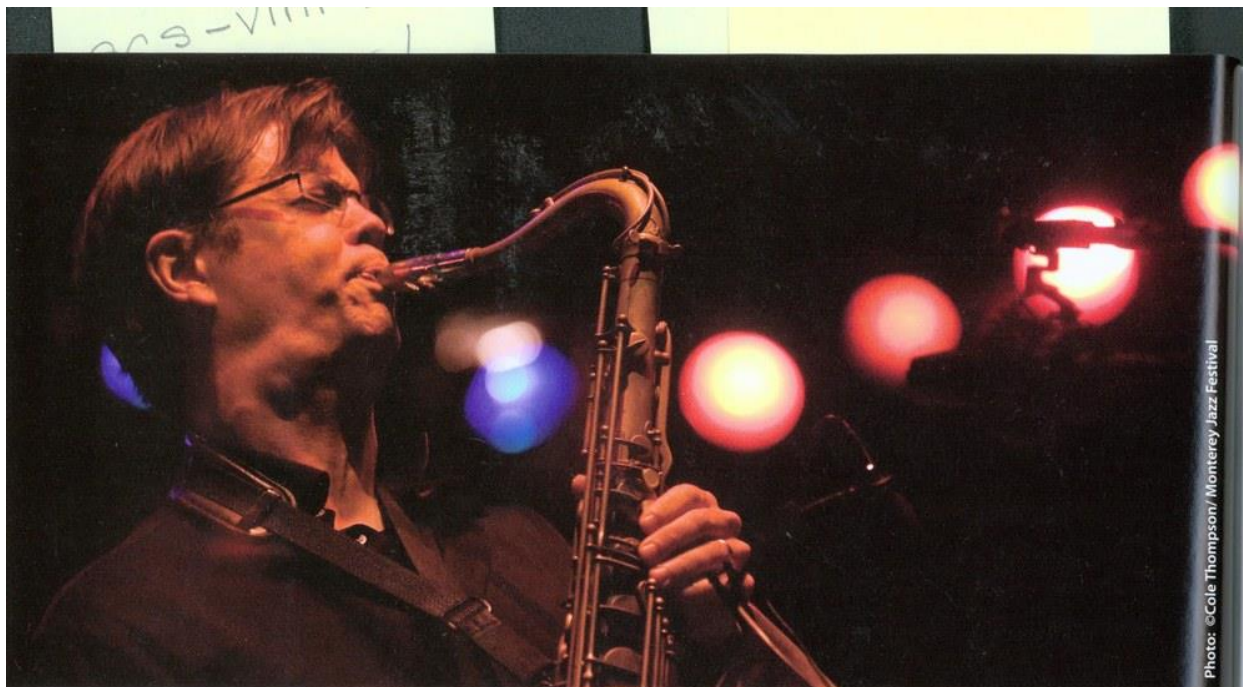


Photo: ©Cole Thompson/ Monterey Jazz Festival

'Mustang Sally' and 'Feel Like Making Love.' All those different genres coexisted seamlessly for me as a child."

That rich amalgam figures strongly in Donny's latest album, "Perpetual Motion," which has been described as a mix of "angular post-bop, rich, polyphonic funk, ethereal balladry." It is a brilliant compilation of electric, eclectic jazz, strongly influenced by the musical environment in which he grew up. One of the tracks, "Energy Generation," was inspired by Tower of Power's classic hit song, "You've Got to Funkifyze." Donny saw them live as a teen and played their records over and over. The entire album draws on the rich variety of music he listened to back then — Led Zepelin, Christian McBride, Donny Hathaway, Cannonball Adderley, Miles Davis, and of course bassist Paul Jackson, with whom he played as a teen.

A 1983 graduate of the then-stellar Aptos High School jazz program, Donny was fully grounded in both music fundamentals and live performance.

"I had the best of both worlds," he said in a phone interview from his Brooklyn apartment, where he lives with his wife Sarah and their two young children. "I was in a good junior high school band program and then an excellent high school music program. At the same time, I was getting training and professional experience playing in my father's band."

He first performed when he was 12, and he started playing consistently, with his dad, when he was 16.

"I was getting on-the-job experience with my father and I also was in this incredible

high school music program where we were rehearsing five days a week," Donny said. "It was a tremendous combination for me."

That combination wouldn't have been there for him today, as educational budget cuts have forced Aptos High School to disband its music program.

"It saddens me to hear that," Donny said, "especially when I think about all the history that the school has and how many musicians I know — people of different generations — who went through that program and are now professional musicians. The formal aspect (of music education) had a tremendous influence on me."

Because of the high school jazz program, Donny got to play with the Monterey Jazz Festival's California All-Star band. After high school, he got a full scholarship to the Berklee College of Music in Boston.

"It was formal jazz training and a good environment," Donny said. "I don't feel that I would be in the position I am today without having that experience."

For one thing, he met legendary vibraphonist Gary Burton there and later toured with him for four years. He has played with many jazz greats since then, including a performance with pianist Danilo Perez at Carnegie Hall. His father saw that concert and said it was one of the highlights of his own musical career.

There's no question that Donny McCaslin



is one of the major saxophone voices of his generation. The heady jazz scene in New York is the perfect place for him, yet he always remains true to his roots.

"I love Santa Cruz and I loved growing up there," Donny said. "It was a great cultural environment. It really has a deep impact on my musical DNA. It's such a rich culture. I really love it there."

Donny McCaslin will be touring the Midwest and Canada with the *Perpetual Motion* project. His new album will be released sometime this fall. He hopes to tour the West Coast with his quartet after that. ♣

(Top) Donny McCaslin on stage at The Monterey Jazz Festival in 2008.

(Bottom) Don performing at Severino's in Aptos with his current band, the Amazing Jazz Geezers.