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JAZZ

3 to get ready

Leading their own bands rather than coming up through the ranks



Thaddeus Dixon



D'Sean Jones



BY CHARLES L. LATIMER

It's a tradition in jazz that before starting a band, a rising talent plays in an established one for some years, finding a musical voice, developing a name and absorbing firsthand how a professional band operates.

For example, before musicians such as alto saxophonist Kenny Garrett and bassist Rodney Whitaker became stars, they first served lengthy apprenticeships. Garrett learned from such greats as trumpeters Marcus Belgrave and Miles Davis, while Whitaker played for six years with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and other aggregations.

Not too long ago, budding players in Detroit looking to make a name could count on groups such as the late pianist Teddy Harris' ensemble, the New Breed Be Bop Society, and pianist Harold McKinney's weekly jazz workshop, Detroit Jazz Performance Lab, to get their chops together. Even as far back as the 1950s, jazz talent like tenor saxophonist Donald Walden, late drummer Roy Brooks and clarinetist Wendell Harrison learned the various jazz languages from pianist Barry Harris, who according to those musicians gave music lessons to any young musician serious about playing jazz in the basement of his west side home.

But jazz clubs have come and gone over the decades, leaving nowhere for bands to play regularly, and the once thriving support network for budding musicians has suffered. Nowadays, there are few established bands or workshops where up-and-coming talents can go to get their act together. So, at the age where normally aspiring jazz musicians would be serving an intense musical apprenticeship, a growing number of talented young jazz musicians are starting bands.

And surprisingly enough, they sound polished and are working quite regularly.

"That kind of opportunity for me is not present right now. So it's kind of like you have to take the cards that you've dealt and make the most out of the opportunities," tenor saxophonist De'Sean Jones says, and it's an opinion shared by many of the aspiring jazz musicians making their presence known on the Detroit scene.

Jones, a 19-year-old bandleader and freshman at Michigan State University, is among a group of promising young musicians, including 21-year-old

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vocalist Jesse Palter and 23-year-old drummer Thaddeus Dixon, who've formed jazz bands, as well as some twentysomething rhythm section cats such as pianist Mike Jellick, Ben Williams and drummer Nate Winn, who are also in high demand as sidemen.

"They are the new direction of jazz in terms of taking music to the next level," Baker's Keyboard Lounge co-owner Johnny Colbert says. He encouraged Jones and Dixon to form their bands. "Their energy is untapped, and that's what I want at the club," he continues. "They need the exposure, and this is a launching path for them because the stage has been set to come in and continue the legacy."

"They are the roarin' young lions."

The musicians are also all business. As a vocalist, Jesse Palter evokes the great (and recently departed) Anita O'Day. Two years ago, she took a hiatus from her studies at the University of Michigan to start a band, and she's been working steadily since.

Palter has a unique way of approaching a song; it's as if she has an intimate relationship with it. And although she's still a local sensation, the vocalist comports

herself as if she's the star talent for a major record label.

"I'm blessed that I'm able to perform so much on the scene," she says. "I wouldn't trade the opportunity to be a bandleader for anything."

Watching drummer Thaddeus Dixon, leader of the Thaddeus Dixon Quintet and a recent graduate of Michigan State University's jazz program, is like experiencing one of the jazz bands from the '50s and '60s — the MJQ or the Jazz Crusaders maybe. Dixon has a lot of stagecraft, and his band is professional on every conceivable level. At his shows, Dixon performs jazz classics, and his performances always sound as if the drummer is paying homage to the pioneers of the music: names like Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane.

De'Sean Jones is the most adventurous of the current lot. His performances have the bustling energy of a neighborhood picnic. The young tenor player knows his way around the classics, but he prefers to play originals. He also has a fat-ass sound, and can make his tenor swing and sing at the very same time.

Palter, Dixon, and Jones are optimistic. They don't feel that having not played in more established bands has or will ultimately hurt them.

"I think that starting our own bands early is a good thing, because it gives us a mind-set that you have to hustle. I think that's a good spirit and mentality to have. The new school of musicians has to be hungry," Dixon says.

Are these eager new-school musicians missing valuable experience? Trumpeter Marcus Belgrave, who mentored Regina Carter, Kenny Garrett, Geri Allen and Robert Hurst before they became major jazz stars, thinks so. However, he also understands that the youngsters have few options.

"There hasn't been anything for them to look up to," he says. "They're in school, and learning all they can. But you can't learn the music in a book; a lot of the music is life itself. They're scrambling, is what I call it. They have a few ideas, but they don't know the other angles. They don't know about the idea of music being a service."

Still, these young musicians should be supported and taken seriously. They're hungry, and they're doing their best. Plus, they have journeymen's understanding and appreciation for the music. They could easily be somewhere complaining about there being no bands to play in, or how they've been shortchanged. Instead, they've taken control of their future.

In her short time on the scene, Palter has performed more than 300 gigs, has an exciting indie debut album in *I'm Beginning to See the Light*, and recently played two sold-out showcases at the Blue Note jazz club in New York City. In addition to sometimes performing four nights a week around town, the vocalist is gearing up a tour this summer.

Despite their inexperience, which rarely shows when on the bandstand, these musicians have created opportunities for themselves. Dixon's quintet holds court regularly at Baker's, but the young bandleader's main paycheck comes from tours with the legendary soul group the Spinners. Meanwhile, Jones just landed a permanent gig headlining Thursday night at the Limit Cocktail Lounge, a new jazz spot in Detroit.

"I feel that they are ready, and we must expose their abilities," Baker's Colbert says. "Their abilities are such that they're going to be growing, and I see that more and more as they play. There's a nice core number of young talented musicians who are following the jazz genre, the reviews have been overwhelmingly favorable."

De'Sean Jones performs Thursdays at the Limit, 15535 Eight Mile (at Greenfield), Detroit; 313-341-8000; he also performs June 2 at Cliff Bell's, 2030 Park Ave., Detroit; 313-961-2543. Jesse Palter performs with

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her quartet Thursdays at Cliff Bell's. The Thaddeus Dixon Quartet plays May 26 at Baker's Keyboard Lounge, 20510 Livernois Ave., Detroit, 313-345-6300.

Charles L. Latimer writes about jazz for *Metro Times*. Send comments to letters@metrotimes.com.

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