

Piano great Robert Irving III nurtures the Generations



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Robert Irving III

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When he was 26 years old, Chicago pianist Robert Irving III joined the band of one of the most revered musicians in jazz: Miles Davis.

Irving played with Davis from 1979 to 1988, serving as music director and foil for a profoundly creative jazz innovator (who died in 1991 at age 65).

Now Irving is returning the favor forward by leading a band of young musicians he hopes to nurture, just as

Davis inspired him. Irving's aptly named Generations septet, which plays Sunday evening at SPACE in Evanston, holds considerable promise, in part because he has convened impressive young artists such as saxophonists Rajiv Halim and Irvin Pierce and drummer Makaya McCraven. Add to this Irving's well-known achievements as pianist, arranger and composer, and Generations – which had its unofficial premiere last summer at the Museum of Contemporary Art and has performed infrequently since then – could mark a turning point for all involved.

For Generations plays original material and arrangements by Irving, giving him a chance to stretch out as writer while enabling young players to learn from a master.

"I was 26 when I met (Davis)," says Irving, who now finds himself mentoring the new wave of young musicians. "It became this clear lineage that's happening that just seems the right thing to do.

"It's special for me, too, because I played trombone and (other) brass instruments throughout grade school, but I loved saxophone, I loved the sound of woodwind ensembles. That's another reason it's special – to have a chance to hear the warmth and tonality and the expressions of reeds is amazing, and to get to write for that."

You can perceive the beauty and ingenuity of Irving's music whenever he places his fingertips on the keyboard, his voicing and chord constructions as surprising as they are expressive. The opportunity to encounter his ideas in an ensemble that features guitarist Scott Hesse, bassist-vocalist Emma Dayhuff, drummer McCraven and three saxophonists (including Laurence d'Estival Irving, the pianist's wife) will pique the interest of anyone who values distinctive jazz writing.

The scope of Irving's vision was apparent at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park in 2009, when the pianist led his sprawling Sonic Portraits Orchestra in the world premiere of his homage to Davis, "Sketches of Brazil." Alas, the evening's over-amplification made it difficult to discern details of Irving's opus, which only heightens one's interest in hearing what the pianist has created for the more manageably sized Generations.

"I hear really expansively since I did the 'Sketches of Brazil' piece at Millennium Park," says Irving, who hopes eventually to restage the piece. "It's been hard for me to come down from that.

"So (Generations) is a way for me to write for an expansive group. Those reeds, the guitar, which is a polyphonic instrument, the voice is mostly wordless so it enriches the melody – it all just gives me an opportunity to explore a lot of different orchestration and see what works."

Irving hastens to note, however, that the idea for Generations wasn't entirely his. After he married Parisian alto saxophonist Laurence d'Estival in 2012, she suggested he alter his tendency to feature jazz stars for his annual birthday tribute to Davis.

"She said, 'You're always bringing in your (star) performers, but you work with all these great young players (in Chicago),'"

"She said, 'That's the same thing Miles did when you were coming up.' So it kind of shifted my mindset about that."

Thus was born Irving's concept for Generations.

D'Estival moved permanently from Paris to Chicago last July and soon became a key figure in the band. Irving

plans to increase the ensemble's performance schedule this year and take it into the recording studio, as well, suggesting this could be his next major vehicle.

If so, it could be a fascinating one, partly because Irving uses an alternative tuning system for Generations. By tuning pitches slightly flatter than is the norm in America, Irving believes Generations offers "a way of enveloping people and bringing them into the sound and the music."

Soon Chicagoans will be able to judge for themselves.

Also worth hearing

Ari Brown: The formidable saxophonist carries forth traditions of Chicago tenordom. 8 and 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 4, 8 and 10 p.m. Sunday; at the Jazz Showcase, 806 S. Plymouth Court; \$20-\$35; 312-360-0234 or jazzshowcase.com

Eddie Palmieri; Carlos Henriquez: Pianist Palmieri will lead his Latin Jazz Band; bassist Henriquez will open the evening with his quintet. 8 p.m. Friday in Orchestra Hall at Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.; \$28-\$70; 312-294-3000 or cso.org

Typhanie Monique: A strong Chicago singer who needs to be heard more, Monique will front her quartet. 5 and 7 p.m. Friday and Saturday at Andy's Jazz Club, 11 E. Hubbard St.; \$10-\$15; 312-642-6805 or andysjazzclub.com

Rose Colella: The Chicago singer celebrates the release of her album "Cocktail." 9 p.m. Friday at the Green Mill Jazz Club, 4802 N. Broadway; \$12; 773-878-5552 or greenmilljazz.com

Miyumi Project. Avant-garde jazz meets Japanese musical tradition in Tatsu Aoki's long-running and productive venture. 9:30 p.m. Saturday at Constellation, 3111 N. Western Ave.; \$5-\$10; constellation-chicago.com

"Too Hot to Handel: The Jazz-Gospel Messiah": Handel's magnum opus swings freely. 7:30 p.m. Saturday and 3 p.m. Sunday at the Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Pkwy; \$25-\$70; 800-982-2787 or auditoriumtheatre.org

Victor Goines: The eminent reedist appears with the Northwestern University Jazz Orchestra and guests, presented by the non-profit Hyde Park Jazz Society. 7:30 to 11:30 p.m. Sunday at Room 43, 1043 E. 43d St.; \$10; hydeparkjazzsociety.com

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"Portraits in Jazz": Howard Reich's e-book collects his exclusive interviews with Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald and others, as well as profiles of early masters such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday. Get "Portraits in Jazz" at chicagotribune.com/ebooks.

Robert Irving III's Generations

When: 7 p.m. Sunday

Where: SPACE, 1245 Chicago Ave., Evanston

Tickets: \$12-\$22; 847-492-8860 or **evanston.space.com**

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