

Prime Time Big Band marks 20th anniversary as city jazz institution



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As far as jazz institutions go in this city, well, they're probably it.

A living, breathing, walking, talking, blowing, strumming, drumming, singing, swinging and all around excellent testament to the music's endurance in a town where it's taken its fair share of licks and lumps.

And this weekend this monument to jazz, this gift to jazz lovers, this local pride and joy will further cement their place in the city's landscape, when they celebrate two milestones that are a feat for any musical institution.

On Saturday, the 18-piece collective the Prime Time Big Band will mark its 20th anniversary as an entity and its 13th season hosting the Big Band Brunch at Inglewood haunt the Ironwood — first at its old location which is now the Blues Can and currently in its gorgeous spot in the old Garry Theatre.

“It started as a rehearsal band,” recalls band leader and trumpet player Dave Jones, who put the group together when he finished almost three decades serving in the music branch of the Canadian Armed Forces.

“And we just wanted to play good quality music with good quality musicians.”

That they've done, with Jones and some of the region's finest players from the jazz and classical worlds hooking up to hone and match their chops on songs from the big-band era in private before moving out of the rehearsal space and into public performances.

First it was dances and special concerts and then — a baker's dozen of years ago when the demand was at a high, the passion from the players was just as strong and their repertoire had reached an impressive and eclectic number of selections — a bi-weekly event that takes over the Ironwood every second Saturday from September to the end of June.

“It's just kind of mushroomed,” says Jones.

“There’s nothing like an 18, 19-piece big band playing events like the old Glenn Miller big band — people love that.”

So much so that along with those concerts and 13 years of regular Ironwood shows under their collective belts — the latter which Jones is confident makes them the “only professional big band in Canada playing on a regular basis” — they’ve also released a CD and attracted a “great following, a big fan base” with an e-mail mail-out list that now numbers around 1,200.

There are some among that group who have, Jones estimates, “maybe missed four” brunches, which has also required that their library of numbers they can pull from is large enough that they can and usually do go a full year without repeating a selection.

That, when playing an average of 15 songs an event, also has the added bonus of “keep(ing) the musicians fresh and enthusiastic about playing music.”

Not that any of the all-pro lineup would ever mail it in. The current Prime Time crew is a spectacular who’s who of local players and features: Richard Harding, Eric Friedenber, Pat Belliveau, Keith O’Rourke and Gareth Bane on saxes and woodwinds; trumpet and flugelhorn players Jones, Jim Murray, Leanne Paisley, Andre Wickenheiser and Al Muirhead; Brian Walley, Jim Scott, Dave Reid and Paul Toutant on trombones; with Derek Stoll on piano, Kai Poscente on bass, John deWaal on drums and vocals provided by Deanne Matley.

And not surprisingly, with names like that involved, the reputation of the band has grown far beyond the city limits. Jones says that’s allowed them to have featured some high-profile guests over the years, some of the musician’s “heroes,” including: Canadian legends Tommy Banks, P.J. Perry, Guido Basso, Ian McDougall and American artists such as Bobby Shew and Marvin Stamm

“The word is getting out and no matter who I call they have all heard about the band. And when I talk about dates and I say, ‘This is all we can pay you, are you OK with that?’ Every single person has said yes,” says Jones.

“Which is a reflection of the band that they know they’re going to play with.”

And, again, the fact that the Prime Time Big Band, as an institution, has survived and thrived over the past two decades and the past 13 seasons is not

only a reflection of the skill of those involved and the sheer quality and entertainment value of the project, but also, perhaps more importantly, shows that jazz does, indeed, have a home in Calgary and always will.

“There absolutely is an audience for it,” Jones says enthusiastically. “You bet there is.”

Spotlight: Prime Time Big Band perform Saturday afternoon at the Ironwood with their Big Band Brunch. For reservations call 403-269-5581.



Calgary jazz musician Dave Jones is celebrating 20 years with his Prime Time Big Band/photo by Bill Lane