

# Jones keys into bond with icon; Jazz pianist pays tribute to Oscar Peterson;

Calgary Herald  
Thu Apr 2 2009  
Page: E1  
Section: Entertainment  
Byline: Bob Clark  
Source: Calgary Herald

Imagine sharing the stage with the childhood friend and idol who later became one of the greatest pianists in the history of jazz.

"It was truly a thrill to finally sit across from him," says pianist Oliver Jones of his gig with jazz icon Oscar Peterson in a concert at Place des Arts celebrating the 25th anniversary of the Montreal International Jazz Festival in 2004.

"It's something I will always remember, something that will stay with me as a wonderful memory."

Jones had been lured from a self-imposed retirement at the prospect of playing opposite Peterson.

"I hadn't touched the piano for about four-and-a-half years, and people were saying, 'Well, how are you going to do a concert at Place des Arts?' " Jones says.

"But somehow, it didn't affect me and I was just so thrilled to have been there."

The two had talked about playing together for many years, Jones reveals, with the younger pianist frequently joking to his friend that if they were ever going to share the same stage, Jones would have to team up with his (Peterson's) sons--because, as Jones recalls telling him, "That's the only way it'll be even."

Both men grew up 12 doors apart in Montreal's working-class, mostly black Little Burgundy district.

Both also received most of their early classical training from Peterson's sister, Daisy.

"Oscar was someone I saw just about every day of his life, as a youngster," says the 74-year-old Jones, a much-honoured icon in his own right who performs at Jack Singer Hall tonight with Calgary's **Prime Time Big Band** in a concert tribute to one of Canada's most treasured musical artists (Peterson passed away in 2007).

"I first saw him perform when I was five, and it had such a lasting impression on me. I remember myself and three or four of my friends sneaking up to the front row (of our church) to watch him play.

"I just couldn't believe that anyone could play that fast, or had that much command over any instrument --and he was only 15 or 16 at that time.

"By the time I was 10, he was already travelling the world."

For Jones, the quality that stood out most in Peterson's character was his pride and steadfast determination, the latter of which he had in abundance right from the start.

hugely important in an era that afforded few opportunities for blacks.

"He was determined and really challenged by his father (a train porter and amateur musician) to make something of himself," Jones says. "And he just knew there wasn't going to be anything else that was going to stand in his way-- he was going to be the No. 1 jazz pianist in the world.

"He had a discipline that was so unusual for a jazz artist at that time. No one ever thought it was possible to do as much as he has done. For 60 years, he was at the top of the jazz world, and he never took it for granted."

That kind of determination remained well into Peterson's last years, a period marked by bouts of debilitating arthritis as well as the effects of a severe stroke which left him relying mostly on his right hand at the keyboard.

Those years, says Jones, whose friendship with Peterson had grown closer than ever, were "very hard for him."

"He did not accept the fact that he could not (play). People would tell him it was time for him to retire or stop, but that was just not part of his makeup--which is why he continued to play right up until he couldn't anymore. And although he was playing mainly with one hand, he was still playing more than the majority of us play with two."

Having Jones perform with Prime Time is "a huge opportunity for the band," says Prime Time founder and leader Davy Jones. The ensemble, formed in 1994, numbers some of the Canadian and American jazz worlds' most prominent instrumentalists as past guest soloists--musicians of the calibre of P. J. Perry, Phil Nimmons and Doc Severinson, to name a few.

This time, says bandleader Jones, "we decided to go for the greatest living jazz piano player in the country."

The decision couldn't be more fortuitous for a program dedicated to some of Peterson's favourite jazz standards as well as five movements from the jazz immortal's Canadiana Suite (arranged by Rick Wilkins, whom Peterson himself dubbed, "the greatest musician I've ever met").

Watching Oliver Jones play, says Prime Time's Jones, "is like witnessing God on the keyboards.

"I don't think there's anybody that can touch him in Canada for dexterity and fluid, beautiful lines. With somebody like Oliver, everything makes so much sense. It's so easy to listen to--and so exciting, because he has such unbelievable technique.

"Just like Oscar."