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On stage at NJPAC performing Rahsaan Roland Kirk's "Bright Moments" to close the tribute to Dorthaan Kirk on April 28 are (from left) Steve Turre, Mark Gross, musical director Don Braden, Antoinette Montague and Freddy Cole. Photo by Tony Graves.

SNEAKING INTO SAN DIEGO

Pianist Donald Vega's long, sometimes harrowing journey from war-torn Nicaragua to a spot in Ron Carter's Quintet. Schaeen Fox's interview begins on page 14.

BRIGHT MOMENTS!

"Dorthaan At 80" Celebrating Newark's "First Lady of Jazz" Dorthaan Kirk with a star-filled gala concert and tribute at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center. Story and Tony Graves' photos on page 24.

BRIGHT MOMENTS!

Newark's First Lady of Jazz Dorthaan Kirk Feted at NJPAC

Photos by Tony Graves

Driving down Central Avenue into downtown Newark to the New Jersey Performing Arts Center on Saturday evening April 28 the sudden sun shower ended as abruptly as it began and the colorful arc of a rainbow appeared in the sky ahead — a sign that seemed to augur well for the evening of jazz music ahead.

The performance on tap that night, billed as *Bright Moments: Celebrating Dorthaan at 80*, was a gala musical tribute to Dorthaan Kirk, a long esteemed central figure of the jazz scene in Newark and beyond. The Victoria Theater quickly filled with “D.K.’s” many friends on hand to join in the salute, including Mayor Ras Baraka, current and former staff members from jazz radio WBGO, NJPAC executives and sister Kirk’s fellow parishioners from Bethany Baptist Church.

Dorthaan was born and raised in Texas (the trace of a longhorn drawl can still be heard) and lived in California before moving east with her second husband, the extraordinary multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk. The musician was blind and much of Dorthaan’s education in jazz history came from reading the backs of album covers to her husband when they shopped for records. She traveled with Kirk on the road performing from 1970 to 1977, when he died at age 41, and she now manages his music rights and publishing company.

Shortly after Kirk’s death Dorthaan met WBGO founder Bob Ottenhoff who hired her for the fledging jazz radio station — a shrewd move given the many contacts gained over the years helping with her husband’s career. Ottenhoff told the crowd, “One of the best things we did was hire Dorthaan.

She gave us instant credibility in the jazz world.” She went on to have a long career at the station as Director of Community Relations and Special Events, producing and promoting concerts and events and notably coordinating the Children’s Jazz Series. (Later in the evening she announced that she would retire from WBGO after nearly 40 years.)

When John Schreiber became NJPAC’s second President and CEO in 2011 he consulted with Dorthaan about his plans to present jazz at the arts center, including the James Moody Jazz Festival, and dubbed her “Newark’s First Lady of Jazz.” The moniker was picked up and featured in several news articles but when it appeared in *The New York Times* she told Schreiber, “Now I believe it.” In addition to her work on the Moody festival she curated a long running Sunday jazz brunch series at NJPAC’s NICO Kitchen + Bar called “Dorthaan’s Place.”

Dorthaan was also one of the driving forces behind the creation of the Saturday evening Jazz Vespers at Newark’s Bethany Baptist Church, a series that’s grown over eighteen years into an important part of the city’s jazz schedule and many members of the church, including its former pastor, were in the audience for the show. (Current pastor Rev. Adkins-Jones was called away by an emergency.)

The music was as special as the occasion, filled with performances by longtime friends of Dorthaan’s who jumped at CEO Schreiber’s invitation



Dorthaan Kirk shown below her large portrait displayed above the sage of the Victoria Theater speaks to the crowd.



Brandee Younger’s beautiful harp playing added a touch of elegance to the evenings’s musical performacne.

to join in the tribute. The lineup was strictly A-list, including Freddy Cole, Stefon Harris, Steve Turre, Cassandra Wilson, Brandee Younger, Antoinette Montague and Mimi Jones.

All masterfully managed by musical director Don Braden. These all-star mix and match presentations can feel haphazard and slapped together but this show was seamlessly smooth and seemed impeccably prepared. Some highlights:

- Newark native Antoinette Montague’s trademark up through the audience stage entrance (“Do What You Wanna”) followed by a rollicking audience call and response “Let the Good Times Roll,” replete with Ms. Montague’s smashing kazoo solo.
- Stefon Harris’ quartet performance of Duke Ellington’s “Come Sunday,” after a rubato opening the melody rendered simply at a slow tempo, embellished by cascading runs, then dropping out of tempo for a tour de force close as the vibist sings along with his playing.
- Brandee Younger and Don Braden playing airy tune that ended in a rolling vamp, Braden repeating his riff from almost offstage.
- Trombonist Steve Turre, a longtime member of Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s band, performing on multiple sea shells, one appearing to be nearly two feet in length.
- A visibly frail Freddy Cole nevertheless delivers a masterful three-song performance. The opening “Sometimes I’m Happy” featuring a note perfect Basie-like piano accompaniment followed by a breezy “Its Crazy But I’m in Love.” The to close he stood next to the piano to croon a moving “You and Me Against the World,” accompanied by his fine guitar-led rhythm section.
- For his turn in the spotlight musical director Braden gave an eloquent performance of John Coltrane’s “Resolution,” highlighted by Oscar Perez’s powerful piano playing.

■ Cassandra Wilson, who opened with “Skylark,” was joined by Stefon Harris for Abby Lincoln’s “Throw It Away” and then by Braden for “Sweet Georgia Brown,” played as pure swing.

Two Rahsaan Roland Kirk compositions were performed. “Dorthaan’s Walk,” with its infectious bopping melody and strolling bass line closed the concert’s first half. (The blind Kirk identified people around him by the sound of their gait, Turre explained.) And after Ms. Kirk gave gratitude-filled remarks to all present, including many personal friends who had travelled from near and far (as far away as Germany), the mischievous voice of Rahsaan Roland Kirk began to speak over the theater’s sound system. It was his playful stream of consciousness spoken word opening of the live performance of “Bright Moments.” All of the musicians were on stage to enter on cue and perform the song as Kirk’s monologue ended, with Wilson, Montague and Cole joining in on the tune’s catchy two-word title lyric. The performance was filled with joy m, and provided a suitable close to a memorable evening.

Bright moments indeed. That rainbow hadn’t lied. ▣
— Tony Mottola



Saxophonist Don Braden, the evening’s musical director, gave a noteworthy performance of John Coltrane’s “Resolution” with a quartet that included (l-r) Oscar Perez, Mimi Jones and Jeremy Warren.



Freddy Cole played an homage to the unique piano style of the immortal Count Basie.



Mayor Ras Baraka was on hand to present “Newark’s First Lady of Jazz” with a Proclamation on behalf of the city.