

MUSIC

Skilled hands conjure jazz from piano

Story by Victor Greto / Photograph by Jennifer Corbett

Don Glanden has the world on a string.

Riffing on the 1932 Harold Arlen melody one evening from a burnished black piano bench near the bar in Sullivan's Steakhouse on U.S. 202, his thin face is bent over the black and white keys, like his salt-and-peppered hair and mustache, mellowed by the muted lights.

His left hand taps at the familiar chords, while the fingers of his right hand tickle the chord progression like a teasing sibling.

If Delaware jazz has an image, it's that of Glanden darkly cornered in that bar, infusing familiar melodies with quixotic variations that lead you up and down cobblestoned alleyways and back home again.

His sole accompaniment, bass player Bob Culligan, hunches over his shapely instrument. As Culligan tugs at each thick string, Glanden's head turns to catch each phrase of notes in his ear.

"It's impossible to play a bad note in jazz," Glanden, 53, said days later to a handful of high school students at The University of the Arts in downtown Philadelphia. That is, if you know tertian harmony, know the four different types of chord triads like the back of your music-making hands.

"Jazz seems complicated," he said. "But it's a series of small things mastered."

Glanden, a professor at the school, is on sabbatical as chair of the piano department and of jazz graduate studies. But he was there to teach a "clinic" to a handful of high school kids.

He shows them that right-handed riffing on those traditional left-handed Euro-classical chords turns the black-and-white world of the 88 keys of the piano into a rainbow of varying rhythms and sliding blues notes.

He plays them Bach, then gospel, then Duke Ellington's magical mix of Europe and Africa and America.

After hearing jazz's knotty, byzantine notes, the relative simplicity of a Bach chorale, marching through the air with counterpointing notes and voices, seems a relief.

But it's not. Bach is as deceptive as Ellington or Arlen or Coltrane, and Glanden knows it: All great music is an intricate counterpoint to all other music, incestuous, adoring, personal, universal, from classical to romantic to modern, from ragtime to swing to bebop, the last of which worked to thin out the classical influence till it became an echo.

But the echo of that heritage never fades.

When Glanden plays and becomes lost in the music, he has the world on a string because jazz has the history of music on a string.

Glanden first turned on to jazz at age 10, when a man by the name of Charlie Freeman came to his suburban north Wilmington home and tuned the family piano.

Freeman, a jazz musician who tuned pianos to help make a living, played bluesy jazz, Glanden said, “like Wynton Kelly who played with Miles Davis,” and whose CDs pile high in Glanden’s music room at his home.

Glanden lives in the same house where he first heard Freeman play, a house he bought from his mom and where he mostly raised his two children and lives with his wife, Jody.

His music room is cluttered and stacked with jazz festival posters and record albums and cassette tapes and compact discs and a piano and a keyboard and a drum kit and milk crates filled with his working manuscripts, pages filled with fragments of ideas for melodies.

Glanden also writes essays on interpreting music. He has recorded and released several CDs on the Cadence Jazz Records label, plays at festivals and occasionally plays backup at major concerts for visiting singers. And he teaches at the school.

“Teaching is an integral part of my career,” he said. He gets to talk and teach jazz and classical music to students longing for their own hands to resonate with the history of music.

“He’s a god in the department here,” said one of his students, Hakeem Reid, of Camden, N.J.

One of many, because there are several fine musicians there, like Tom Giacabetti, head of the guitar department, who has played on Glanden’s CDs and who has played for the likes of Petula Clark and Don Rickles in Atlantic City.

Three blocks south of Philadelphia’s City Hall and Billy Penn’s unblinking eyes sits the “hub of jazz activity in the area,” Giacabetti said.

In front of the school on Broad Street, students unceremoniously play to a lunchtime crowd, which stops, walks, stops and then cheers as the kids bebop their way into maturity.

Glanden has just started investing in and learning the technology of recording for himself. He bought music software with which he can layer different tracks until he pinpoints an interpretation he likes. In his music room, he can play his Roland F-90 keyboard into a Kurzweil Sound Module, which can create any possible instrumental sound.

At 2 o’clock one morning, he wrote a Bachian “Chorale in G”.

He recorded it from the keyboard, and when he plays it from a burned compact disc, the tones of the strings sound like a rich and sinuous orchestral shrug, straining to find a place in the world.

That world that Glanden has quivering expectantly on the end of a string, whenever and wherever he sits at a piano and plays.

Signature **BRANDYWINE** winter 2006 The News Journal

