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Quartet Brings Interplanetary Jazz to Nevin's Pub



“Jazz from Planet Flippo” performs its unique repertoire, which is inspired by world music and rock arrangements. The quartet now plays twice a month at Tommy Nevin’s Pub in Evanston.

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Dave Flippo is from his own planet. But, he counters, so is everybody else.

“That’s the weird thing about human existence. Every person walking around, they’re the center of their universe,” Flippo said. “When I write my music, I’m not writing it for other people; I’m writing it for myself and expressing my own world.”

Flippo is a composer and musician whose quartet, “Jazz from Planet Flippo,” has started a series of performances at Tommy Nevin’s Pub in Evanston. They currently play twice a month at Nevin’s — their next show is Jan. 22 — and feature a variety of Flippo’s compositions, from world music-inspired pieces to “jazzified” covers of popular songs.

Though Flippo started off writing classical and contemporary concert music, he said he was drawn to the freedom and improvisation of jazz. After 11 years of pursuing higher education degrees and with a newly-earned doctorate under his belt, the Pittsburgh native decided to continue pursuing jazz music in Chicago.

His group, “Jazz from Planet Flippo,” started out around 25 years ago under the name “Flippomusic Globaljazz.” Since then they have recorded five albums and performed at various venues in the Chicago area, with Flippo composing, playing keys and sometimes adding vocals.

Donn DeSanto, the bassist for the group, called Flippo a “musical genius.” He said Flippo’s music has a unique and unconventional sound that is difficult to describe.

“He hears things in ways that no one else does,” DeSanto said.

Part of this distinctive style, Flippo said, comes from his extensive use of what he calls “dirty chords,” or dissonance. He likened his music to a Gauguin painting, with earthy tones that blend some darkness into the brighter colors.

When composing, Flippo said he likes to keep a specific idea or phrase in mind to guide the music. The group’s fourth album, “Tao Tunes,” was actually based on the “Tao Te Ching,” an ancient Chinese text.

“The words and the way the words flow make melodies come out of them,” Flippo said. “Speech has ups and downs, so for things with text that’s how I (compose).”

The group’s most recent album, “Life on Mars,” takes a different approach. It includes jazz arrangements of various rock songs, from the Beatles to David Bowie.

This concept was inspired when Flippo was playing in a Wilmette restaurant and the owner asked if he knew any Jimi Hendrix. Though Flippo said he is not naturally a “rocker,” after playing around with a few rock tunes, Flippo decided to turn these arrangements into a full album.

Flippo’s eclectic style has now found a home at Nevin’s. Though the pub started out featuring mostly Irish music, manager Brian Davenport said these days they are “open-minded” when it comes to musical acts.

“As long as they can get a few people in the door and create a good atmosphere, we book all kinds of shows,” Davenport said.

The performances are being marketed as an event for all ages, and Flippo said he hopes the arrangements of familiar tunes draw in a younger crowd. He added that musicians need to keep refreshing the genre to make sure it doesn’t die out, citing jazz legend Miles Davis’ adoption of hip hop styles.

DeSanto, however, said he is not worried about the future of jazz. Unlike rock, which he described as “like vanilla cake” that eventually becomes tiresome, he said he is confident that jazz will continue to evolve.

“Jazz is something that is timeless,” DeSanto said. “It’s not the flavor of the month.”

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