

JazzFest: Sam Blakeslee takes the stage

by Max Newman



In addition to the stellar indoor lineup, there will be a myriad of talented artists featured on the outdoor stage at this year's Tri-C JazzFest Cleveland, to be held June 20-22 at Playhouse Square. One to keep an eye on is New York-based trombonist and composer Sam Blakeslee, who will be performing on Friday, June 21 at 6:45 pm as the bandleader of the Sam Blakeslee Large Group.

Blakeslee is cherishing the opportunity. "I have a pretty close relationship with Tri-C," he told me during a telephone conversation. "When I was still living in Cleveland, I was the director of the

JazzFest Academy, and then I taught trombone lessons at the College. I'm very grateful they've been supportive of me to come through and work with the students a couple of times a year, but this is the first time since 2017 that I'll be performing with my own band. So it will be a nice reunion of sorts."

Blakeslee has been playing the trombone since his early childhood in Columbus. "Growing up, my mom had a clarinet and a trombone from when she was in band in high school, and she told me I could pick one of them. I tried to get some notes out of the clarinet and nothing happened. I picked up the trombone, and at least something came out. So I said, OK, I'll do this."

Throughout his early life, Blakeslee experimented with a variety of instruments, including guitar and piano, before focusing again on the trombone as he prepared to go off to college. "One of the reasons why I started gravitating towards it is that it has such a similar range and timbre to the human voice. I just love the emotion that you can get

out of it, the way you can approximate pitches to emulate those human sounds. That's kind of what keeps me coming back to the instrument."

Blakeslee did not really begin to delve into the composition side of things until late in his college education at Youngstown State University. "By my senior year, the way that it worked out with the classes, I had to take some arranging courses with Dave Morgan. He's an incredible composer who I think most younger musicians have been influenced by in Northeast Ohio."

During graduate school at the University of Akron, Blakeslee's interest in composing continued to grow. "While I was doing a classical performance degree, I was a jazz studies graduate assistant, and my director Jack Schantz said my only responsibility was to write music for the ensemble. So it was a pretty good deal. I was lucky that I was around a lot of people that pushed me to pursue writing."

At this time, Blakeslee was also beginning to perform with the Cleveland Jazz Orchestra, where he played music by some of his biggest writing influences, such as Paul Ferguson and Chas Baker. Listening to the music of Bob Brookmeyer was also incredibly impactful. "I just loved the sound that he was getting out of the ensemble and how courageous and inventive a lot of his compositions were."

Many of Blakeslee's influences are musicians that he's played with, including those in the current New York scene (where he moved in 2017), and several people in Northeast Ohio, including Chris Coles and Nathan Paul Davis. "This is a generation of people that still informs how I want to write. It's been really fun just to continue to collaborate with people that influenced me early on, especially because I was three to five years younger than most of the other people that I was hanging around on the scene with. So they're like my big brothers. I really appreciate their musical voices."

As well as his performing and composing career, Blakeslee has also worked as a music educator for almost a decade. In addition to directing the JazzFest Academy from 2015 to 2017, he has served on the faculty of Youngstown State University and the Cleveland Institute of Music. He has also given clinics at a variety of schools, and is currently on faculty at the University of Hartford's Hartt School of Music as a jazz trombone teacher and the Jazz Big Band director.

Working in education has largely influenced his ideas as a musician. "It's really made me understand the totality of the big band canon, and it's also allowed me to realize where there are gaps in my own playing and listening. So the accountability of being an educator is what is really exciting for me."

Blakeslee also hopes he can inspire others in the same way that he was inspired. “There may be someone in the ensemble who had never thought about writing for a big band before, but catches the bug by playing something of mine, or another contemporary voice. It feels like an important position to be in.”

In terms of his own art, Blakeslee’s large range of musical interests is reflected in his different projects. “Each project is kind of serving a different part of my musicality that I want to dig into. I played a lot of piano and guitar in high school, and it was a huge part of my musical discovery. So my Wistful Thinking project was kind of a way for me to live vicariously through Brandon Coleman, who’s the guitarist on it.”

Then there’s the Sam Blakeslee Large Group’s material. “That can sometimes be extremely straight-ahead jazz stuff, but there’s some music that’s going to be released that’s very chamber-oriented and more on the contemporary classical side. My goal over the course of several albums is to have the listener be perpetually surprised by what’s coming out next. My next idea is to do something smaller with piano and violin that dives into my love of Bach.”

As for his JazzFest set, the audience can expect more new material. “I was commissioned to write a full suite of music for JazzFest. It’s a seven-movement suite dedicated to Akron jazz luminaries and people connected to the University who were important in the local scene. We’ll be doing a big premiere a little later in the year, but this is kind of a soft opening for that suite, called *Flowers for River City*.”

Live performances tend to excite Blakeslee in a different way than the recording environment. “It’s fun to really get into that nitty-gritty level of detail in the studio. But I love the risk of many people playing together live — everyone’s kind of on the edge of their toes. And if it’s a windy day or something like that, large ensemble music becomes a very different endeavor. So it all adds to the inherent risk and the thrill of it all with performing.”

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