

Music @ Main: Pianist Theron Brown

By Max Newman



Pianist Theron Brown wants you to be able to hear his own personality in his music. “I try not to think about it too much. My music is part of me, and I try to be authentic and true to myself within it. I want people to listen and be like, ‘Oh, that’s Theron.’ It’s real, it’s honest.”

This heart-on-sleeve philosophy will come to the fore on Saturday, February 28 at 1:00 pm as Brown’s jazz trio performs at the downtown Cleveland Public Library. The

show, organized in celebration of Black History Month, is part of the CPL’s “Music at Main” series, a genre-bending concert series held in the Library’s third flood lobby.

Born the son of a pastor in Zanesville, Ohio, Brown first fell in love with the sounds he was hearing at church, although he admits that his musical views at the time were “very limited.” His introduction to jazz came in high school, after he had already tried his hand at the drums, piano, and viola.

“I remember my junior or senior year of high school, there was this cellist that would come by for master classes. I would warm up on the piano and just play around before rehearsal started, and he heard me and asked if I’d ever checked out jazz music. Of course, I was like, no, I thought it was considered the devil’s music at the time [laughs]. The next day, he brought me a Thelonious Monk book and CD with a lead sheet for me to follow along. And that’s when it kind of resonated with me, and I got the bug.”

Brown went on to study jazz at the University of Akron, a time that he says was formative to his artistic, technical, and personal development. “It helped me to have structure and to actually learn how to read the music, learn the theory. It also helped me to just play with other people

that were either at my level or above. It was important that I got out into the community and started gigging fairly early. I think that's the best way to learn. Just to get out there and 'Figure it out in the streets,' as they say."

After graduation, another important opportunity presented itself to Brown. Rather out of the blue he was offered a relatively high-profile acting role as the young Herbie Hancock in the 2015 Don Cheadle-directed movie *Miles Ahead*. "I'm still not sure who recommended me for it," said Brown. "I got a call, and I thought it was a hoax. But I ended up going down to the audition just by chance, and the next thing I knew, I was getting a call that I would be portraying Herbie in that film. It really helped my career."

Brown was eventually given the chance to meet his idol: "He was performing at Severance Music Center in Cleveland, and I got invited to go and just watch the concert. Little did I know, I'd be able to go backstage and meet him. He remembered me still, some 10 years after the movie, so it really gave me some closure. But, yeah, what an opportunity. It's one of those things that you just can't plan for."

Brown, who counts mentors and peers Jack Schantz, Kamau Kenyatta, and Sean Jones among his biggest influences, has further embedded himself in the Northeast Ohio music scene as a music teacher — he currently serves as the co-chair of the jazz department at his alma mater. He admits that balancing teaching with his creative pursuits can be challenging.

"I've recently released *Mr. Magnetic*, which is my newest album. And I've been working on this stage show based on the children's book *The Remember Balloons*. But balancing that with administrative work can be a challenge. Then again, if you can get into the habit of just making that automatic, then you have time to be creative. And my students are inspiring. It reminds you that life changes so much, that you just have to roll with it, like jazz improvisation. If you get stuck in a position, you need to find a way out and make it beautiful."

Saturday's performance will not be Brown's first at the Cleveland Public Library. "I think we've done this now at least three or four times in a row for Black History Month, and it's always a blast," he said. "It's a free show so we get some folks who might not be able to get to the late night jazz club scene to hear me play. And because the setting is so intimate, I even let the crowd ask some questions after we get done playing."

Drummer Zaire Darden and bassist George DeLancey will join Brown in a concert the pianist is absolutely delighted to be playing. "They could get anyone to do [the Black History Month show], so I always try to bring my best self. And I'm always full of gratitude every time I get to play in this area — Northeast Ohio has treated me so well, so it's an honor to play for the people."

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