



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
JULY 5, 2011

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Monty Alexander Jazz Festival to Pay Tribute to Charlie Byrd

Jazz enthusiasts will gather on Labor Day Weekend to pay tribute to legendary jazz and classical guitarist Charlie Byrd at the Monty Alexander Jazz Festival presented by Jazz on the Chesapeake. The Festival's tribute to Byrd, who is known around the world and is also a Maryland treasure, will to be held on Saturday, September 3, 2011 at 4 p.m. at the Avalon Theatre in Easton. The tribute will feature multi-talented American jazz guitarist-composer-producer and international recording and touring artist Nate Najar, collaborating with accomplished vibraphonist and drummer Chuck Redd and his ensemble.

Redd, who performed for 19 years with the Charlie Byrd Trio comments, "Charlie Byrd left an indelible imprint on my life and career. As a 21-year old musician, he put me in contact with jazz luminaries and I learned very quickly." He adds, "In every performance I do, I am always paying tribute to Charlie. He was my mentor and his music is in me."

Redd is paying this experience forward by mentoring Nate Najar, who has been profoundly influenced by Charlie Byrd. He states, "It is unusual to have such a young musician adapt the Charlie Byrd style. Nate understands his music."

Redd describes Byrd's music as jazz in a blues and country way, noting the influence of his native Virginia on his style. He added that Byrd would say there is blues in everything we play. Redd states, "He had his own way of approaching jazz that was very intimate and personal. One time when we were playing, he said, 'Just play a simple beat. I want this tune to sound like a guy playing on his front porch for friends.'"

According to Redd, the Monty Alexander Jazz Festival will be the first Byrd tribute at the Avalon Theatre where Byrd performed once a year toward the end of his career. Locally, Byrd also performed at the Mainstay in Rock Hall in Kent County, MD. Mainstay founder, Tom McHugh recalls his decision to call Byrd to invite him to play at his new center for the arts in Rock Hall, "I had an interest in jazz music and was a fan of Charlie Byrd. It was my dream to get him to play at the Mainstay. When I asked him if I could book him with his trio for a ridiculously low fee, he told me he would call me back. About 20 minutes later when he called me back to tell me he would come, he said. 'We all started in places like this.'"

McHugh goes on to tell the rest of the story. When one member of the Charlie Byrd Trio got sick, only Byrd and drummer Chuck Redd ended up performing at the Mainstay that night. He comments that the concert was a magical one and one of only two times that Byrd performed at the Mainstay.

McHugh adds, "What Charlie Byrd did for the Mainstay was to put us on the jazz map, connecting us to internationally-known jazz players, including such acts as Bucky Pizzarelli." The Mainstay has dedicated a room to Charlie Byrd and offers musicians the opportunity to play on the Oriental rug from Byrd's practice room. The rug was given to McHugh by Byrd's widow, Becky.

Redd, who frequently plays at the Mainstay today, remembers his time playing with Byrd, as well as legendary jazz pianist Monty Alexander, at 'Charlie's,' Byrd's club in Georgetown, MD. Alexander, the Festival's artistic director, who accompanied Byrd on numerous occasions over the years, wants to pay homage to their past association and to the guitarist's many accomplishments in jazz. The Monty Alexander Trio will round out the evening on September 3 with a performance following the Byrd tribute on Saturday night at 8 p.m.

The Festival also provides the opportunity each year to bring "emerging jazz artists" before appreciative audiences in Easton. The 2010 Monty Alexander Festival gave 18-year old Grace Kelly, an amazing alto saxophonist who is hailed as a rising star in the jazz world, a chance to feel the unbridled enthusiasm of the Festival's audience. On Friday, September 2 at 7 p.m. at the Avalon Theatre, trumpet player Dominick Farnacci and pianist Aaron Diehl, will perform as a duo, followed by the Grace Kelly Quintet. Farnacci, who opened for British rock stars Jamie Cullum and Jeff Beck at the famed O2 in London, has gained recognition from Quincy Jones who says of Dominick "this kid is 360 degrees!" Diehl, who has performed with the Wynton Marsalis Septet, is known for his interpretations of the music of Scott Joplin, "Jelly Roll" Morton, Art Tatum, Duke Ellington, and other masters.

The Monty Alexander Jazz Festival is generously underwritten by Verizon, with additional support from numerous private sponsors. Tickets reservations can be secured now, however, tickets officially go on sale July 15, 2011. For further information about Jazz on the Chesapeake, visit ChesapeakeChamberMusic.org/jazz or call the CCM office at 410-819-0380.