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Jazz Greats Pay Tribute to Charlie Byrd

By Amy Blades Steward

On Labor Day Weekend, the Monty Alexander Jazz Festival will feature two days of concerts by renowned jazz musicians, including one that pays tribute to jazz great Charlie Byrd. Byrd's influence was significant on the jazz scene both internationally and in the Delmarva region, and he became an especial favorite of jazz aficionados in Washington and Annapolis, where he lived and frequently performed. The Festival's "Salute to Charlie Byrd" will be held on Saturday, September 3, 2011 at 4 p.m. at the Avalon Theatre in Easton.

While there have been several tributes to Byrd over the years, the Festival's "salute" means a great deal to Byrd's widow, Becky, of Annapolis, MD, as well as to his family. She comments, "Anytime jazz lovers want to pay tribute to Charlie, it does my heart good. This tribute at the

Avalon Theatre in Easton is a special one because Charlie had a wonderful experience playing there during the latter part of his career.”

She adds that she is especially touched by the musicians who will pay tribute to her late husband at the event, including 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.

She comments, “Chuck Redd was like a son to Charlie and a significant member of the Charlie Byrd Trio for 19 years with Charlie’s brother Joe, who played bass for the Trio. Nate Najar, a talented young acoustical jazz guitarist, was profoundly influenced by Charlie’s playing style and used it as he developed his own unique acoustical jazz style. A special part of the tribute will be when Nate plays some tunes on Charlie’s Ramirez guitar – those will be some special moments for me.”

Becky Byrd recalls meeting Charlie Byrd at the Maryland Inn in Annapolis. “He was such a special and real individual. When I first talked to him at the Maryland Inn, I was struck by how laid back and approachable he was. He later took me sailing and we just hit it off.” She adds, “It didn’t take long for me to realize how special his music really was. He loved playing music and because of that he created a beautiful sound. The other thing that really impressed me was his commitment to practicing sometimes four hours a day. This meant I got a private concert every day at home.”

Byrd comments that she is also looking forward to hearing legendary jazz pianist Monty Alexander, the Festival’s artistic director, who played with Byrd on a few occasions over the

years. The Monty Alexander Quartet will round out the evening on September 3 with an 8:00 p.m. performance following the Salute to Charlie Byrd that afternoon.

The Festival also provides the opportunity each year to bring “emerging jazz artists” before appreciative audiences in Easton. The 2010 Monty Alexander Festival gave then 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 Farinacci and pianist Aaron Diehl, will perform as a duo, followed by the Grace Kelly Quintet. Farinacci has gained recognition from Quincy Jones, among others, 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 of the jazz piano.

The Monty Alexander Jazz Festival is presented by Jazz on the Chesapeake, a program of Chesapeake Chamber Music, dedicated to promoting jazz in the Chesapeake region. The Festival is generously underwritten by Verizon, with additional support from numerous business and private sponsors. Tickets can be purchased online at ChesapeakeChamberMusic.org/jazz or by calling the Chesapeake Chamber Music office at 410-819-0380. For further information about Jazz on the Chesapeake, visit ChesapeakeChamberMusic.org/jazz or call the CCM office at 410-819-0380.