



Entertainment

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Sounds of the Caribbean permeate the jazz of Dion Parson, band



Dion Parson | SUPPLIED PHOTO

Mary Houlihan | For the Sun-Times

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Dion Parson is proof that you can go home again, both literally and musically. The jazz drummer splits his time between New York City where he has lived for the past 25 years and the Caribbean island of St. Thomas where he grew up and where he is involved in music education. But he doesn't stop there in his pursuit of home and the music he grew up with in his corner of the Virgin Islands.

In 1998, Parson and Ron Blake, another Virgin Islander, formed the 21st Century Band, an ensemble that promotes their cultural heritage and melds the many styles of Afro-Caribbean music with jazz. When you think of Caribbean jazz, it's usually Latin jazz, Parson says. But to create the band's new sound they looked to the music from their Caribbean roots — calypso, soca, quelbe, reggae and mento.

“We decided to pay homage to Caribbean music through the vehicle of improvisation,” Parson says. “We take all these basic Caribbean rhythms and implement jazz harmonies on them.”

Dion Parson and 21st Century Band makes its Chicago debut as part of the University of Chicago Presents Jazz at the Logan Series, a program that brings world-renowned jazz artists to Chicago’s South Side.



Dion Parson and 21st Century Band | SUPPLIED PHOTO

Band members, in addition to Parson on drums (he’s also the band leader), are Ron Blake (saxophone), Rashawn Ross (trumpet), Reuben Rogers (bass), Carlton Holes (piano), Victor Provost (steel pan) and Alioune Faye (percussion/sabar drums).

The 21st Century Band began as a sort of experiment as its seasoned members already had busy careers. Through years of “a gig here and a gig there,” word began to grow and Parson and Blake realized they had created something unique.

“It began as something we did for fun,” Parson notes. “Today it’s a group that stands on its own and is a force to be reckoned with.”

Parson loves to talk about the inspiration behind the band’s creation: Life in the United States Virgin Islands. He says growing up there was “really beautiful.” He was influenced by those aforementioned musical styles as well as the rock, pop and jazz on the Billboard charts.

“It was a rich diverse upbringing full of island life and American life,” Parson recalls, adding, “There is a big American influence on the islands but we have our own culture that sets us apart.”

As a young child, Parson was already enthralled with drumming and banging on anything in the house. His frustrated mother eventually convinced his school’s music teacher to let him bang on some drums instead. But he wasn’t allowed to play drums in the house so his teacher suggested he try the trombone, a move that allowed him to learn the fundamentals of music.

“By the time I switched to drums, I had a solid understanding of what music was from a melodic and harmonic standpoint,” he says. “I quickly learned how to fit into a group of other musicians playing melodic instruments and how to work with them.”

He’s played with a long list of artists including Milt Jackson, Terence Blanchard, Jon Faddis, Cyrus Chestnut, Dianne Reeves, Victor Goines, Babatunde Olatunji and Baaba Maal as well as performing in the orchestra of the original Broadway version of “The Color Purple.” The 21st Century Band also is a mainstay at Jazz at Lincoln Center with a return engagement June 10-12.

Another facet of Parson's career is dedicated to education. He's taught at many universities, including his alma mater Rutgers, and is an artist-in-residence at the University of the Virgin Islands. He and his wife, Nicole, also created the United Jazz Foundation in the Virgin Islands, which offers music education to children in grades K12.

"The main goal of the foundation is to give the students a realistic approach to music, music education and the world outside of the Virgin Islands. We want them to be creative and express themselves. It's all aimed at helping them make an informed decision if they want to pursue music," he said.

The concert here is preceded by a free performance in Cafe Logan at 6 p.m. by the Chicago-based trio Twin Talk. The performance is part of Chicago Stage at the Logan, which showcases local jazz talent in partnership with The Jazz Institute of Chicago.

Mary Houlihan is a local freelance writer.

MUSIC

👤 DION PARSON

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Dion Parson and 21st Century Band

When: 7:30 p.m. April 29

Where: Logan Center for the Arts, 915 E. 60th

Tickets: \$35; (\$5 for students)

Info: tickets.uchicago.edu [u](#)

