

Pianist savors the rhythm: Melodic Standards on the Program When Mosca Trio Plays Campus Concert - William Patterson University

By Zan Stewart
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For pianist and teacher Sal Mosca, there's nothing quite like digging into evergreens like "Sweet Lorraine" or "All of Me" and giving them a good workout.

"The tunes are written beautifully, with beautiful lyrics, melodies and harmonies," said Mosca, 77, who lays out lines with a singing melodic quality underpinned by vibrant rhythm. "They're ideal as a basis for jazz improvisation."

Mosca, who will offer a bouquet of standards with his trio Sunday at William Paterson University in Wayne, said that while these songs were often presented in Broadway shows in a "corny way," jazz artists like Lester Young and Art Tatum made masterworks out of them.

"That's what I try to do," said Mosca, a native of Mt. Vernon, N.Y., who lives there on the top floor of a commercial building he owns.

The pianist, who studied with the innovative Lennie Tristano, said he begins by respecting the work of the composer. Then he mixes in his own feeling, plus renditions by other

musicians.

"So when I play (Gershwin's) 'Embraceable You,' I can hear Bird (Charlie Parker) and Pres (Young) playing it, and Billie (Holiday) singing it," he said. "All that mixed with my feeling, and it comes out my own way."

These days, many artists, seeking freshness, deconstruct standards so they sound like another song. Mosca sees no need. "I play a song differently every time, with (perhaps) a variation on them -- melody or different chords, different tempos, so it always puts something into it."

At William Paterson, Mosca will work with bassist Don Messina of Scotch Plains and drummer Bill Chattin. The trio has been together going on five years and plays with vitality and depth on its CD, "Thing Ah Majig" (Zinnia), out today.

"There's great feedback between (Don and Bill)," Mosca said. "They're not loud, don't play a lot of complex rhythms. They play in a simple way and keep good time. I see jazz as a conversation with myself, and Don and Bill are there to support and complement me. That helps me to concentrate on my lines."

Guests at the concert include singer Alexa Fila and trumpeter Bob Arthurs.

Mosca got started in music listening to such greats as Fats Waller and New Brunswick's

James P. Johnson on his family's player piano. He began piano lessons at age 14, and soon fell for jazz.

"I loved the beat," he said. "Classical music has rhythm, too, but it's more subtle, not a main part of the music. In jazz, it's a main factor. Rhythm thrills me."

Mosca's early favorites were Teddy Wilson, Erroll Garner and Art Tatum, who changed Mosca's life when he heard him one afternoon on New York's famed 52nd Street. Later came bop greats like Bud Powell and Parker.

Studies with Tristano from 1947-55 were key to Mosca's development. Tristano had him sing solos by Parker and others. "That's when I saw how great this how great this music is," Mosca said. He now does the same with his students.

Mosca played with saxophonist Lee Konitz until 1965 and has been a leader since. He said he sees his life in music, which has given him so much, as a "great pleasure."

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