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When it rains jazz, it pours

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When it rains it pours, and it looks like there will be a deluge of jazz music coming down in Winnipeg for the next several months and into next year.

The Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra recently announced its 2008-2009 season, Jazz Winnipeg has just released its full lineup for the jazz festival coming up in June, and now we get the schedule of artists set to appear at next season's Izzy Asper Jazz Performances series.

The Asper jazz series has been one of the success stories of the city's arts community over the past several years. The demand for tickets to concerts forced organizers to add a third performance to each weekend this past season, and all three shows still sold out for every concert. So, for next season, organizers have decided to move one of the concerts from the small 200-seat Berney Theatre to the much larger space at the Manitoba Theatre Centre to accommodate their growing audience.

Before mentioning the show at MTC, there are four other shows that will take place in the series. On Oct. 5 and 6 of this year, alto saxophone player Bobby Watson will be bringing his band to town to kick off the season. Watson is a veteran of the jazz scene, having spent several years in Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers as musical director, and in bands with Max Roach, Louis Hayes, Joe Williams, the Marsalis Brothers and others. He has recorded at least 26 recordings as a leader and has appeared on hundreds of others. The band that will be with him in Winnipeg features Victor Lewis (drums), Terrell Stafford (trumpet), who wowed audiences here this year with John Clayton's band, Edward Simon (piano) and Essiet Okon Essiet (bass).

Next up on Nov. 4 and 5 is guitarist Lionel Loueke and singer Gretchen Parlato. Loueke and Parlato are not yet very well known in Canada, but their stars are rising very quickly. Loueke, who some might remember from last year's Jazz Winnipeg Festival as Herbie Hancock's guitarist, is from Benin, West Africa. He made his way from there to Paris, later to the Berklee College of Music in Boston, and then to the prestigious Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, then in Los Angeles, where he caught the attention of Hancock, Wayne Shorter and Terence Blanchard, who soon after hired him for his band. Loueke has since gone on to tour the world with his own trio, blending West African harmonies and rhythms with jazz to create a fresh and energetic sound.

Joining Loueke and his trio will be Los Angeles singer Parlato. She has been involved in the arts from a young age, was the first vocalist to be accepted at the Thelonious Monk institute of Jazz, and was also the winner of the 2004 Thelonious Monk

International Jazz Vocals Competition, where she impressed judges Flora Purim and Little Jimmy Scott. While she is obviously at home in the jazz realm, she has developed a particular affinity for Brazilian music, and along with Loueke creates a musical palette that is deeply rhythmic, original and passionate.

March 4 and 5 find trombone star Steve Turre returning to town. Winnipeg jazz audiences are familiar with Turre, who has been in town numerous times over the last several years. Turre has a very diverse mix of influences in his music. Born in San Francisco to Mexican-American parents, Turre grew up listening to blues, jazz, mariachi and rock, and went on to perform in various salsa bands around the Bay area. His career picked up in 1972 when he was hired by Ray Charles to join his band, and he has since gone on to play with dozens of jazz legends such as Dizzy Gillespie, McCoy Tyner and Horace Silver, rock stars like Van Morrison and salsa greats Mongo Santamaria and Tito Puente.

Jamaican-born piano star Monty Alexander will return to Winnipeg after several years with his intoxicating mix of calypso, gospel, blues and jazz on April 12 and 13. Alexander has made nearly 60 recordings over his four-decade career. Along with his award-winning collaborations with top artists like Bobby McFerrin and Natalie Cole, Alexander is a regular feature at top international events and venues like the Montreux Jazz Festival and Carnegie Hall.

To cap off the 2008-2009 season, Downbeat's male vocalist of the year, Kurt Elling, will make a one-night appearance at the MTC on May 23, 2009. Hailed by the New York Times as "the standout male jazz vocalist of our times", Elling will bring his longtime band, Lawrence Hobgood (piano), Rob Amster (bass) and Kobie Watkins (drums). Elling has performed twice at the Jazz Winnipeg Festival.

Series subscribers will have until May 12 to renew their subscriptions. If they are not sold out, subscriptions will be opened to the public on May 13.

To get your name on a growing waiting list, call the Rady Jewish Community Centre at 477-7510.

Casual tickets to individual concerts can be purchased before each concert or at the door.

Casual tickets for the Kurt Elling MTC concert will go on sale at Ticketmaster next spring.

Elling (above) and Watson in Asper series lineup.

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