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Bassist McBride lives up to hype

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Hyperbole is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "deliberate exaggeration, not meant to be taken literally." Too often there is an excess amount of hyperbole attached to a musician, and it becomes increasingly difficult to pull out the grain of truth in the vast desert of hype. A lot of musicians put in their bios that they have played with this jazz great and that jazz legend, simply because they sat in with the artist for one or two songs during a gig. But, as local musician Steve Kirby told me one time, until you have been called to join their bands or asked back again to tour with them, then you cannot truly say that you have played with them.

Bassist Christian McBride is one of the few young jazz musicians around who can legitimately claim that he has played with a huge array of big-name artists in many different genres, and when his playing is described as virtuosic, there is no hyperbole attached. McBride is coming to town for a set of shows next week, and if you are lucky enough to get a seat to one of the concerts, then you will have the chance to witness it yourself.

McBride, who will be this year's concert finale in the Izzy Asper Jazz Performances series, will be bringing his own band to the 200-seat Berney Theatre on May 25 and 26. He will be joined by Geoff Keezer (piano), Ron Blake (saxophone) and Terreon Gully (drums), a quartet known as the Christian McBride Band that for the last five years has been blazing a trail from Europe to South and North America. Any one of these artists is worth the price of admission -- as Winnipeg audiences have seen with some of Gully's performances over the past few years -- but collectively they are a true jazz powerhouse.

Keezer was 17 and had only completed one year at the Berklee School of Music when he got offers from both Miles Davis and Art Blakey to join their bands (he joined the latter). He toured and recorded with Blakey's Jazz Messengers for two years. Perhaps one of his most influential collaborations was spending several years as Ray Brown's main piano man.

Blake, who has recorded four of his own CDs, he has been in demand for his soulful, gritty and hard-swinging saxophone playing.

Drummer Gully has been here several times over the past few years. He is one of the hardest hitting drummers on the jazz circuit and is equally at home performing jazz, funk, hip hop, pop or Afro-Cuban.

I caught up with McBride last week in New Jersey, where he was getting ready to perform in the eighth annual Jammy Awards ceremony at Madison Square Gardens. He told me how blessed he was to have these musicians in his band.

"Individually I have known these guys for over 19 years. I met Geoff (Keezer) back in senior high school and we have played in several groups together -- Benny Golson, Joshua Redman ... and I met Ron (Blake) when he was playing with Roy Hargrove. Terreon was recommended to me by Jeff "Tain" Watts. I told him I wanted someone who could play R&B, fusion, someone like him, a mini-version of him, and he suggested Terreon, and I hired him just on that recommendation alone."

Grammy Award winner McBride has been a force on the jazz scene now since 1989. Born in Philadelphia and raised on a steady diet of all types of music, he came to jazz after studying classical music. The bass has always been his choice of instrument, first electric, then acoustic.

"The acoustic bass for me has always been the preeminent jazz instrument. Not the saxophone or the trumpet. My father and my uncle were jazz bass players, so there was never any doubt about which instrument I was going to play."

In the last 20 years, McBride has been an integral part of the jazz scene, working with Pat Metheny, Ray Brown, George Benson, David Sanborn, Chick Corea and many others, including pop star Sting.

This summer will be an especially busy time for McBride because he has been selected artist-in-residence for both the Detroit and the Monterey International Jazz Festivals. Not bad for a guy who told me that "by all rights I shouldn't even be a jazz musician. I grew up listening to funk, soul, hip hop, so it's natural for me to be drawn to a lot of other music besides jazz."

All three performances by the band -- there are two on May 25 and one on May 26 -- are sold out, but series producer Bev Aronovitch told me that there are usually a few tickets available at the door and that she has never turned anyone away.

You can also call the Rady Centre at 477-7510 to get your name put on a waiting list and to check for tickets.

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