

"I wholeheartedly support the mission of the Precinct Reporter and its staff. I will defend its right to report on the activities of our government."

Editor

Vol. 57 - No. 6

The Community's Newspaper - Serving Riverside County, Eastern Los Angeles County & San Bernardino County

# Monterey Jazz Festival



## Alive With Jazz, Social Comment

By Barbara Smith  
Photos by ESE

"Buckle up your seat belts!" Grammy-nominated pianist/composer Gerald Clayton exhorted the audience, introducing the Monterey Jazz Festival Next Generation Jazz Orchestra (NGJO) at this year's 64<sup>th</sup> musical bash. It was a cry that resonated throughout the entire weekend, which brought top jazz names to light the way back from the dark reaches wrought by the pandemic. MJF returned from last year's virtual festival with stellar headliners gracing the stage including NEA Jazz Masters Herbie Hancock, Pat Metheny, George Benson and Terri Lyne Carrington, along with blues belter Ledisi, vocalist extraordinaire Kandace Springs, master pianist/composer Gerald Clayton and Artist-in-Residence Christian Sands, all proving the MJF vibe is alive and going strong.

True, the Festival was by necessity scaled down—only two stages, all outdoors, and of course fewer performers.

But the joint was jumping all three days. Prolific pianist/composer Herbie Hancock opened Friday night, swinging from piano to keyboards to iconic keytar, showcasing classic hits to the downright funky and futuristic. MJF New Generation Jazz Orchestra alum Elena Pinderhughes, winsome and effortless on flute and vocals, was absolutely captivating.

Women artists featured prominently throughout the Festival, along with themes of social justice, fine tuning the MJF mission to offer jazz educational opportunities to ever more diverse audiences. With its Summer Jazz Intensive and multiple master classes offered to middle and high school students, MJF's model seeks to reach a broad, diverse population of young artists. NGJO Director Gerald Clayton radiated pride at the Courtyard Stage, where the Next Generation Women in Jazz Combo, a drums/sax/piano/trumpet female foursome gave an outstanding performance and later in the Jimmy Lyons arena, where young vocalist



Ella Brown (vocalist) with Next Generation Jazz Orchestra



George Benson

Ella Brown, a freshman at Howard University, performed a beautifully nuanced arrangement of "I'm Beginning to See The Light," backed by a full NGJO ensemble. "This is truly the future of jazz,"

Clayton beamed. A ward-winning drummer/composer Terri Lyne Carrington, whose barrier-bending group Social Science performed a provocative set on Saturday, featured powerful

vocals fused with political undercurrent. "Waiting Game," a crowd favorite, fused rap, R & B, spoken word and jazz, concluding with a potent melding of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" and "We Shall Overcome."

As artistic director of the Berklee Institute of Jazz and Gender Equity, Carrington is on the forefront of gender and racial justice. High school bands lack African Americans and women because opportunities are given to those whose financial status allows for more access, Carrington has stated. The socially conscious drummer/producer's position at Berklee allows her to identify students with potential whose talent she can nurture, as opposed to selecting "who's 'arrived' and who's going to make the band sound great," she adds, thus making education more equitable.

Mega vocal stylist Ledisi stunked onstage next, shimmering in black skin-bugging lame, and, accompanied by Xavier Lynn's screaming guitar, offered an exuberant set drawing from her New Orleans and Oakland roots in a musical jambalaya. Singing from her independently produced "The Wild Card," she poured out a soulful vibe channeling what she calls "gutbucket music that reminds me of being in a juke joint." Showcasing her enormous versatility was

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Ledisi Group



Debo Ray (vocalist), Social Science

## Jazz Fest

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her tribute to Nina Simone, high priestess of jazz and soul, whom she credits with bringing her back from a time of despair. An artful potion of Simone's musicianship mixed in with Ledisi's own passionate lyrics demanding social justice drew fans to their feet in affirmation.

Sunday afternoon featured Kandace Springs—some call her "the new Ella,"—performing an outstanding set featuring her stellar female group of Caylen Bryant on bass, Taylor Moore on drums and special guest Immanuel Wilkins on sax. Claiming Nina Simone, Roberta Flack and Ella Fitzgerald as major musical influences, the Nashville-born artist honored each, displaying virtuosic piano accompaniment. Her rich

and delicious arrangement of Flack's "The First Time Ever" was worth the price of admission alone.

Closing out on Sunday, George Benson commanded the stage from first moment to last, his crisp, smooth, soulful voice seasoned in the best way with age. He happily blasted every chart-topper—that is, except "The Greatest Love of All" (Whaat!? How could he omit that signature hit)—playing to the excited fans who crowded in front of the stage to boogie and beg for more.

For many, coming out to the Festival was their first foray out from the pandemic. "I love being able to see musicians I know and love and being introduced to new artists," said Gayle Claiborne, retired Pomona Unified School District Child Development Case Load Technician. "It's especially thrilling seeing the young people because they are all our new masters."