

Blues/jazz artist reawakens Detroit's musical past

By Melissa Walsh
Staff Writer

Blues and jazz are bridge genres of American music, connecting epochs and generations in rhythm and verse. Grosse Pointe Park resident RJ Spangler, 61, is a force in this connection.

The affable drummer and mover on the Detroit music scene removes from obscurity hidden-away artists of pre-Motown and Motown-era music and sets them in the spotlight.

And in any set on any stage, Spangler generously treats patrons to Detroit delights, serving up choice jams like “Cadillac Assembly Line” by Sir Mack Rice with his Soul-Blues Gang, for example, or “Such Sweet Thunder” by Billy Strayhorn with his swing jazz big band Planet D Nonet.

Bassist John Barron said, “(RJ’s) kind of responsible for the resurgence of Detroit musicians who’ve been lost to history.”

Among the artists Spangler returned to the stage and studio are rhythm and blues pianists, booking gigs and Joe Weaver. Detroit’s “Queen of the Blues” Alberta Adams, “Driving Wheel” legend Odessa Harris and jump blues guitarist Johnnie Bassett.

“One of my kinds of claim to fame is I got a lot of people another grab at the apple,” Spangler said.



PHOTO
COURTESY OF RJ
SPANGLER

Drummer and jazz and soul-blues band leader RJ Spangler.

eral of Detroit’s aging, lost-to-history artists, with Spangler’s Rhythm Rockers musicians backing them up.

In 2009, Spangler launched Planet D Nonet with two musicians from Sun Messengers.

“We were all together in the Sun Messengers in 1980 and I’ve been playing with some of those guys — like James the trumpeter, which is my co-leader in the Planet D — since 1977,” Spangler said.

Like Sun Messengers and Blues Insurgents, Planet D Nonet attracted many accolades. For its album “Tribute to Billy Strayhorn” — released November 2016 by Detroit Music Factory — the band won the Detroit Music Award for “Outstanding Traditional Jazz Artist/Group.”

Spangler also accrued several honors, including a 2001 nomination for a W.C. Handy Award by the National Blues Foundation, a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Detroit Blues Society in 2005 and induction as Master Blues Artist to the Blues Hall of Fame in 2013.

Locally, Spangler served 25 years in the Detroit Blues Society, including chairman. He also was artistic director of the Jazzin’ on Jefferson Festival 10 years and co-founded the Anti-Freeze Blues Festival in Ferndale 25 years ago.

Not only has Spangler

“I love my community and I am very connected to my school friends,” he said.

See Spangler with the DJ7 at 9 p.m. Friday, March 23, at Cliff Bell’s in Detroit’s Harmonie Park; with the PD9 4 to 7 p.m. Sunday, March 25, at the Blue Goose in St. Clair Shores; and with the Soul-Blues Gang at 10 p.m. Saturday, March 31, at the Fire House Pub in St. Clair Shores.

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