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AZ NIGHT BUZZ



UA music educators to cut loose, fete CD

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Chuck Graham Arizona Daily Star Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Friday, April 8, 2011 12:00 am | Comments

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Sylvan Street is going downtown.

For the first time, this jazz rock Latin fusion band of music educators with University of Arizona connections is playing a Tucson gig off-campus. Sunday at the Rialto Theatre, the guys will be stirring up new sounds to celebrate the upcoming release of their second CD, "Here In America."

"It's not only our CD release party, it's my birthday," said Jay Rees, the group's leader and chief composer. "So we're just going to cut loose and put on a great show.

"Some of the songs from the new album we'll be playing in public for the first time. We started recording this music in 2009, so it has taken almost two years to get finished - and that's a good thing."

Joining Rees onstage at the Rialto are UA music faculty member Kelland Thomas, sax; Los Angeles studio musician Frank Browne, guitar; Chicago studio musician Andrew Hix, drums/vocals; retired member of the U.S. Air Force "Airmen of Note" Kenny Smukal, trumpet; Evan Rees, precocious son of Jay Rees, piano; Tucson percussionist Mike Faltin.

The collection of nine original compositions, six of them all or in part from Rees, can leap across several musical genres in the space of a single track. They make it seem like that word "fusion" just isn't big enough. Like the word needs a couple of more vowels.

"Yes, the Sylvan Street sound has evolved - very much so - since our first album, 'The Perfect Leaf,' came out in 2008," said Rees, the group's leader and composer-in-chief.

Rees is a bass player and former Los Angeles musician who chose to lead a responsible life. In 1995 he joined the UA music faculty, directing the Pride of Arizona marching band and pep band.

Pretty soon the students were marching to the music of the Smashing Pumpkins and Red Hot Chili Peppers. That went well enough, but a few years ago Rees started getting restless again. The marching band was rocking, but he wanted to be playing some music himself.

Calling up his favorite players from those years in Los Angeles, Sylvan Street was formed (named for the street Rees lived on in L.A. when the same guys would all get together in his living room to jam). In 2008, "The Perfect Leaf" was released.

Reviews were positive, jazz and college radio stations were impressed.

"Musically, that album was all over the map," Rees chuckled. "Now we're starting to find the real Sylvan Street sound."

He calls this evolving sound jazz fusion with an edge of progressive rock. "Here in America" has Latin and some elements of pop, but what you remember most is a big, fat band sound full of muscular energy, devouring silence with its massive appetite.

"We're also tipping our hat to where we came from, in the song 'Blue J,'" said Rees. That track is solid blues.

IF YOU GO

Sylvan Street CD Release Party

- When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday
- Where: Rialto Theatre, 318 E. Congress St.
- Tickets: \$5 at the door and in advance at all Bookman's, the Instrumental Music Center, 7063 E. Speedway, the Rialto Theatre Box Office and online at www.rialtotheatre.com; CDs are \$10 at the concert.

Chuck Graham has written about the Tucson arts scene for more than 35 years. Read more of his arts coverage at "Let the Show Begin," www.tucsonstage.com

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Posted in Arts-and-theatre, Music, Chuck-graham on *Friday, April 8, 2011 12:00 am*

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