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Sylvan Street jazz band showcases UA faculty talents

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“When I put Sylvan Street together two and a half years ago, there were two elements that made me take action,” said UA professor Jay Rees from his office in the UA School of Music. Besides teaching, Rees plays bass in a nationally touring jazz ensemble, conducts the UA Pride of Arizona marching band and resembles Rush frontman Geddy Lee.



“One was that I wanted to make music with a very particular group of people ... my absolutely, flat-out favorite musicians.”

The men and woman seated in a semi-circle around Rees remain silent at this humbling remark. Kelland Thomas, saxophonist and fellow UA music professor, lounges against a filing cabinet on the floor and smiles. Wendy Rees, Rees’ wife and contributing lyricist to the Sylvan Street jazz ensemble, sits in the office doorway and casts prideful looks at their 17-year-old son, Evan, a young talent and the band’s keyboardist. Though they say nothing, it seems clear that the people in Rees’ office are glad to be where they are, among each other.

“The other part of it was ... to play for young musicians,” Rees continued. “Because when I was 16 and I heard something like that, it just completely changed my perception of music.”

Tomorrow marks the second annual UA Day of Jazz, a product of Rees and the gang’s desire to inspire young musicians — a chance for them to take the stage together as the eight-piece jazz-fusion ensemble, Sylvan Street. From 2 through 5 p.m. the members of the band will host clinics and master classes for young musicians from 14 Arizona high schools, culminating at Crowder Hall with a live performance for the general public.

Besides UA faculty Rees and Thomas, Sylvan Street is composed of celebrated educators and performers from around the country. Guitarist Frank Browne teaches privately in Los Angeles, and has known Rees since the two attended music classes at the University of Miami together in the early '80s.

Andrew Hix, who also teaches privately in Chicago, plays percussion and provides vocals on the band’s non-instrumental tracks.

Michael Faltin owns and operates Tucson’s Instrumental Music Center, and rounds out the band’s eclectic sound as an ethno-percussionist.

Evan Rees adds his piano and keyboard talents to the lineup, and remarkably has no qualms about playing in a band with his father. Wendy Rees contributes lyrically to the band’s compositions between jobs as a freelance journalist and is a recipient of an MTV “Moon Man”

award as creative director of the 1985 “We are the World” African fundraiser project.

Acclaimed performer Chad Shoopman, the band’s regular trumpeter, will not be playing this week. Kenny Smukal, Tucson resident and former lead trumpet for the United States Air Force jazz band “The Airmen of Note,” will be stepping in to play Shoopman’s parts.

Though Sylvan Street is relatively young and the distance between members limits their tour dates, their reputation already precedes them. Their debut album of original jazz, rock, Latin and funk-fusion compositions, *The Perfect Leaf*, was a longlisted nominee in two Grammy categories and is available on SummitRecords.com.

Their standing as educators is also worth more than a few toots from the trumpet. According to Rees, last year’s Day of Jazz drew about 200 students from high schools around the state. This year, 405 have registered.

It’s hard not to see this as the achievement of Rees’ original educational and inspirational goals for the band. What, then, comes next?

“One word,” Thomas laughed from his spot on the floor. “Kanye.”

Sylvan Street remains lighthearted about their early achievements and shows no signs of stopping. The geographic distance between members has not prevented them from gathering to create a second album of original compositions that the band hopes to have finished by the end of this year, and they’re already confident that this sophomore album will showcase a musical evolution from their first effort.

For a sneak peek of the new material, as well as older favorites and an anticipated jazz-fusion cover of a track from Radiohead’s “Kid A” album, check out Sylvan Street tomorrow at Crowder Hall. It could be your last chance before they’re selling out arenas.



