

Hardwick's Brian McCarthy brings jazz to FlynnSpace

Written by Brent Hallenbeck Free Press Staff Writer
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Brian McCarthy will celebrate his new album, 'This Just In,' with a concert at FlynnSpace on Saturday. / Courtesy photo

If you go:

WHAT

: Brian McCarthy Quintet featuring Ray Vega

WHEN: 8 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: FlynnSpace, Burlington

TICKETS: \$10-\$18. 863-5966, www.flynntix.org

As a kid growing up in Hardwick, Brian McCarthy worked on his jump shot five hours a day and dreamed of being a professional basketball player.

He also dreamed of a growth spurt that never happened — he settled in at a compact

5-foot-7 — and by the time he got to Hazen Union High School he abandoned his hoop dreams. Besides, by then he was practicing something else for several hours a day: his saxophone.

When he got to William Paterson University, a noted school for jazz musicians that's 20 minutes outside of New York City, McCarthy told classmates he practiced on his sax three hours a day. One student

told him that's great for a high-school kid, but students at the New Jersey school practice eight to 10 hours a day. Rather than recoiling in horror, McCarthy embraced the idea of marathon practice sessions. "I was like, 'Really? I can do that?'" he said.

McCarthy's work ethic has made him one of the best-known young jazz musicians in Vermont. He has played with the Grippo Funk Band and the Burlington Discover Jazz Festival Big Band, teaches at three Vermont colleges and found time to create his own quintet. That group, featuring trumpeter and fellow Vermonter Ray Vega, celebrates the release of McCarthy's new album, "This Just In," with a concert at FlynnSpace on Saturday — McCarthy's 32nd birthday.

"He's something of an up-and-coming renaissance man in the community," said Vega, who's known throughout the jazz world for his solo work as well as performing with Tito Puente and Ray Barretto. "He's a hard worker with high standards and a lot of respect for the legacy of the folks who came before him."

McCarthy, in a recent conversation over coffee at Muddy Waters, said he wasn't heavily into music in his youth, though he does remember listening to cassette tapes his father owned of Duke Ellington and Burlington saxophone legend Big Joe Burrell. Another tape, a VHS copy of a 1989 Newport Jazz Festival concert, made the biggest impression on a young McCarthy.

"Branford Marsalis came on and it was like this lightning bolt hits. It connected with me," McCarthy said, referring to the renowned sax player who will perform June 2 at the Burlington Discover Jazz Festival. "It was this energy. It was the cool factor, too. I was like, 'Wait a second — that could be me.'"

McCarthy, who began playing sax in fourth grade, performed in the Vermont All State Jazz Ensemble in the

late 1990s with a couple of other Northeast Kingdom natives still active on the jazz scene – trumpeter Jennifer Hartswick and saxophone player Linda Little, who hails from St. Johnsbury and is managing director of the Burlington Discover Jazz Festival. (She’s also McCarthy’s wife – they married Dec. 20 in the lobby of the Flynn Center, four months after Little took the festival job.)

He left William Paterson in 2007 with bachelor’s and master’s degrees and returned to Vermont, where he has worked with local jazz stalwarts such as Vega and Dave Grippo and recorded his self-titled debut album in 2011 with Tom Cleary, John Rivers and Jeff Salisbury. He made his new album with Vega and a trio of classmates from William Paterson – pianist Justin Kauflin, bass player Evan Gregor and drummer Quinn Blandford.

McCarthy rearranged the Ellington tune “The Feeling of Jazz” but wrote the other seven tracks on “This Just In,” which is built around McCarthy’s energetic but controlled playing that reflects some of the jazz history he said is so important to him. “I gravitate toward traditional jazz because the language it speaks is very meaningful for me,” he said, “and I can only express the inner humanity of what it is through this language.”

McCarthy said he asked Vega to take part in the project because he has been “a great mentor of mine and a friend of mine.” (They both teach at the University of Vermont; McCarthy also teaches at St. Michael’s College and Johnson State College.) He also knows having Vega on “This Just In” has helped him get the attention of jazz radio programmers around the country.

“It’s a bonus to have Ray a part of it,” McCarthy said. “I’ve had (radio) people tell me, ‘Ray on this (album) is kind of why I took a look at it.’” That attention could help McCarthy achieve his goal of taking his quintet on the road to play clubs and jazz festivals around the country.

Vega speaks highly of McCarthy. “His sound is reflective of the new great innovators on the scene today,” he said, mentioning Kenny Garrett, Steve Wilson and Chris Potter. “He’s on his way and I’m happy for him.”

Vega said he didn’t get involved in “This Just In” just to give McCarthy a career push. “I was looking at it like, ‘I want to play with these cats,’” he said.

McCarthy appreciates the boost from Vega but said all he hopes is to break even financially with his career. “The first concern is that I believe in the music,” McCarthy said, adding that only then can the music pay off economically. “It’s not about the dollar sign. It’s about the music.”

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