

Alone at the piano: David Morgenroth's new CD a solo tribute to Duke Ellington

By JAMIE KELLY of the Missoulian | Posted: Friday, February 19, 2010 1:30 am

The true test of any jazz pianist is what happens when sitting at the piano all alone.

For many, that's one scary proposition, even with 10 fingers at their disposal.

Because for those whose skills are not honed to a fine point, playing solo is akin to playing naked – without the support of a bass player and drummer, jazz can expose them in ways they don't want to be exposed.

David Morgenroth is not one of those pianists.

Fully clothed in every aspect of musicianship, Missoula's own Morgenroth has just released a CD that showcases his brilliance as an arranger, improviser and technical master – not to mention bass player, singer and drummer, all of which comes from his fingers.

"Alone With Duke" also serves as a tribute to the late Duke Ellington, the 20th century's greatest and one of its most prolific jazz composers.

Every pianist has a first love, and for Morgenroth, who has played with everyone from Freddie Hubbard to Joe Williams, and is a regular artist at the UM Buddy DeFranco Jazz Festival, one of those first loves was the Duke.

"I was just sitting around at the piano last spring, messing around with 'Sentimental Mood,' and it struck me that it was one of the first 10 tunes I ever learned," said Morgenroth in an interview from his Upper Miller Creek home. "I've known these songs since I was a teenager – 30 years."

The 13 songs Morgenroth recorded last summer in Los Angeles represent just a tiny fraction – albeit a good representation – of Ellington's work, still considered the standard bearer of the jazz library.

With tunes like "Mood Indigo," "Prelude to a Kiss" and "It Don't Mean a Thing (If it Ain't Got that Swing)," the new CD, first released in Japan last year but last week in the United States, contains some of the most popular of Ellington's upbeat and balladic jazz, but also lesser-known but no less beautiful songs like "Single Petal of a Rose" and "Jump for Joy."

Morgenroth has put his musical stamp on all of them with dense and delicious harmonies crafted underneath Morgenroth's uncanny rhythmic interpretations, not to mention the solo lines that spring from a deep musical knowledge.

Ellington's compositions are "an embarrassment of riches" from which Morgenroth had to choose for "Alone With Duke."

Recording Ellington meant only one thing to the pianist: honor the man, honor his songs.

"With Duke, you start with the premise that the music speaks for itself," said Morgenroth, who regularly tours and plays with Missoula jazz singer Eden Atwood, and has also recorded two CDs with her. "I'm not here to improve the music because the music doesn't need to be improved."

Playing it solo does mean, however, that Morgenroth had to be a one-man jazz ensemble – his left hand walking complex bass lines, his right servicing the melody and improvisation, and both driving the rhythm and complex inner harmonies.

Even for a man who has studied jazz for more than 30 years, played with the exclusive University of North Texas Lab I band and taken lessons from legendary jazz pianists such as Fred Hersch, doing so is a daunting musical challenge.

After all, these are songs that will live forever.

“I’m merely playing an exposition,” said Morgenroth, whose other CD “Radiance” was released in 1998. “And I’m trying to do it with musicality, sensitivity and maybe a little imagination.”

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