

Today in Kansas City: In the swing of things

Doug Tatum is doubly psyched to swing.

The executive director of the Folly Theater not only has Kansas City jazz and blues giant Jay McShann headlining the Folly Jazz Series concert at 8 tonight at the Folly. At McShann's request, Tatum also is bringing in tenor saxophone sage Plas Johnson. Johnson's smoky sax has stoked numerous famous recordings, such as Henry Mancini's "The Pink Panther."

Without a dance floor at the historic downtown theater, the aisles will have to do when McShann and Johnson begin boogying together on stage.

"I'm looking forward to the combination," Tatum said. "I think it will be just a really swinging deal. We're certainly honored to bring Jay back once again. He is truly a living legend of Kansas City jazz. And he's still going strong."

Johnson's reputation also precedes him -- or at least his signature sound does.

"Everybody's heard him," Tatum said. "They just don't know they've heard him."

Johnson's extraordinary resume as a sideman reads like a who's who of vintage jazz, r&b and pop stars. He's recorded with Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Sarah Vaughan, Nancy Wilson, Barbra Streisand, Ray Charles, Bobby Darin, Fats Domino, Sam Cooke, Smokey Robinson, Marvin Gaye, the Righteous Brothers and Linda Rondstadt, to name only a few.

McShann was born in Muskogee, Okla., in 1916, most sources say. In 1937 he arrived in Kansas City, where he learned to play boogie-woogie piano by listening to Pete Johnson. In 1942 he formed his own big band, whose members included the young Charlie Parker. McShann never stopped performing, but the pianist, singer, composer and bandleader made a comeback in the 1970s, especially with European audiences.

McShann's new CD is "Goin' to Kansas City," and this fall he appeared in the Clint Eastwood-directed episode of "Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues" on PBS.

No doubt the memories will flow from McShann when he's interviewed by Tatum in a pre-concert "Jazz Talk" at 7 tonight at the Folly, 12th and Central.

"He's got great stories," Tatum said. "Just to be able to hear him talk about Kansas City in the '30s, there's not that many guys still around who can do that."

Admission to the "Jazz Talk" is free with concert admission. Tickets cost \$25 and \$32.50; call (816) 474-4444.

For more entertainment events, go to kansascity.com

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