

Pitt to host 51st annual jazz seminar honoring Pittsburgh pianist Erroll Garner

By Jessica McKenzie, Senior Staff Writer

Orrin Evans can't remember a time when he wasn't making music on the piano. The Philadelphia-based professional jazz pianist said if someone is meant to be a musician, the career chooses them.

"I don't think you can necessarily pursue a career in the arts," Evans said. "I think whatever the art form is, it finds you and gives itself to you. I wasn't seeking a career as a jazz musician, but it came to me."

Evans is one of the featured musicians during Pitt's 51st annual jazz seminar and concert running from Jan. 24 to 29. The seminar celebrates the legacy of Erroll Garner, an accomplished jazz pianist native to Pittsburgh who died in 1977. He would have been 100 years old last year. Pitt delayed the celebration in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This year, all events will be streamed live on YouTube.

The seminar will include several performances throughout the week, an episode of the "Jazz Talk" podcast discussing the University's Erroll Garner archive — which the University curated in 2015 after the death of his longtime manager, Martha Glaser, in December 2014 — on Wednesday and a musicians' rights panel on Thursday.

Evans will be part of performances throughout the week tributing to Garner's compositions, as well as the Jazz Talk episode and musicians' rights panel. He said he is most excited for the seminar because it will give him the chance to connect with other musicians.

"I'm excited to be making music with new people. I know the musicians I'm playing with, just because we know each other from the musical world, but I don't get a chance to play with them often," Evans said. "I'm always excited when new people get together and create music. It's always a special time for me."

Evans is scheduled for a collaborative performance on Saturday evening with bassist Jeff Grubbs, drummer James Johnson III and flutist Nicole Mitchell Gantt — who is director of Pitt's jazz studies program. Evans said he is looking forward to performing music from Garner's discography, especially pieces from Garner's record, "Concert By the Sea."

"'Concert By the Sea' was one of the first records I ever purchased. My father used to listen to it a lot," Evans said. "Erroll Garner's approach to music and his piano playing was definitely a part of my upbringing and my introduction into music in general."

Irene Monteverde, a pianist and jazz graduate student who is pursuing her doctorate at Pitt, was drawn to the jazz studies program because of Pittsburgh's rich jazz history, especially in the Hill District. Her doctorate is concentrated on studying Garner's legacy within the University's archive.

Monteverde participated in the kickoff performance on Monday. She will also be a guest on the Jazz Talk episode on Wednesday, as well as a featured keynote speaker after the panel on Thursday. She said she chose to study Garner because she has always been drawn to his music.



Image courtesy of Jimmy Katz

Orrin Evans, one of the featured musicians during Pitt's 51st annual jazz seminar and concert running from Jan. 24 to 29.

"I just really love his music. I could listen to him forever and not get sick of it. When an artist really captures you and amazes you, it's kind of a no brainer," Monteverde said. "His music just has a light, bouncy quality that makes people feel happy. It's the big, joyous sound that's rooted in Black music and Black culture."

According to Monteverde, Pitt's Garner archive includes documents beyond his music. It also features old concert advertisements, legal documents, Garner's old tape cassettes as well as his personal sketches.

"The archive has some of Garner's doodles, but they're way better than I could ever do. These are things that he was meditating on," Monteverde said. "One of them is a cool-looking bird with a music note as a face. It's got all these pastel colored pencils. It's amazing to see inside his incredible imagination."

Gantt, the founder of the Jazz Talk podcast, said she is thrilled to pay tribute to Garner by playing his compositions this week.

"Erroll Garner is one of jazz history's great virtuosos. He was such an incredible talent — he's from Pittsburgh, but he's known all over the world," Gantt said. "No one has been able to really replace his style, his rhythmic agility, his melodic infectiousness or his incredible velocity as a player."

Michael Heller, an associate professor in Pitt's jazz studies program, will be a panelist during Thursday evening's event. He said he always viewed Garner as a brilliant performer because of his elaborate techniques.

"Garner was one of the most mind-bogglingly brilliant individuals of the last 100 years. Listening to him, I hear this unbelievable stream of inventiveness of variation in what he plays and just the perfection of his technique," Heller said. "Pittsburgh has been the home city of some incredible pianists in jazz."

Besides Garner, Pittsburgh was also home to jazz musicians Earl "Fatha" Hines and Mary Lou Williams. Heller said Garner's legacy expands beyond his immaculate musical talent. He was also a passionate advocate for musicians' rights to own their music, which he will discuss during Thursday night's panel.

"Garner was deeply connected to and invested in social progress and social movements of the time, particularly on behalf of Black artists and Black Americans," Heller said. "It's something that still hasn't been covered enough in Garner scholarship, and we're really working through the archive and through the Garner foundation to reestablish that legacy."

Evans said he hopes that by paying tribute to Garner's compositions, he inspires students in one way or another.

"Everyone I met in my career inspired me in some kind of way, and that's pretty much what I hope to do for the students," Evans said. "I hope they walk away hungry and full of desire to pursue or figure out what they're passionate about."