

Veteran sax player finally gains fame in U.S.

By ANDREW GILBERT

For a number of decades Charles McPherson has led something of a double life.

In Europe, the alto saxophonist headlines at music festivals and is generally accorded the respect due one of jazz's top-shelf veterans. But in the United States, McPherson has often been overlooked and underutilized. Until this year, that is, when suddenly his career shows signs of emerging from the dreaded midlife doldrums that afflicts so many jazz musicians at the peak of their artistry.

Invited to perform at prestigious New York festivals and boasting a new record contract, McPherson is starting to gain the recognition his fiery, bebop-derived improvisations have long warranted.

In San Diego, where he's lived for more than a decade, McPherson just performed in the San Diego Symphony's SummerPops series.

DATEBOOK

Charles McPherson Quartet

8:30 and 10:15 tonight and tomorrow, Horton Grand Hotel's Palace Bar, 311 Island Ave., downtown. \$10. 544-1886.

He'll hold forth at the Horton Grand Hotel tonight and tomorrow, accompanied by his son, drummer Chuck McPherson, bassist Jeff Littleton and pianist Jane Getz.

"I needed a piano player because my regular player is going to be out of town and someone suggested Jane Getz," McPherson said. "I remembered her name and wondered if this was the same Jane Getz who worked with Mingus years ago, so I called her, and I found out she's been in Southern California for a while. I haven't played with her for years, but I remember she was a good piano player, very sensitive

and musical."

McPherson is also playing a series of Thursday-night concerts at The Athenaeum in La Jolla on Sept. 22 and 29 and Oct. 20 and 27, alternately featuring guest musicians Conte Candoli, Buddy Collette and Teddy Edwards.

If any one factor is responsible for drawing attention to the 55-year-old alto saxophonist in recent years, it's New York City's prestigious Jazz at Lincoln Center concert series. Since Lincoln Center began producing jazz concerts in the early '90s under the direction of Wynton Marsalis, McPherson has made a number of high-profile appearances, one of which was released this year on a Columbia CD, "Jazz at Lincoln Center Presents: The Fire of the Fundamentals."

Earlier this month he won strong reviews for his playing in two Lincoln Center concerts set up as alto

saxophone jam sessions with Phil Woods and with Wes Anderson, from Wynton Marsalis' band.

"It was an interesting cutting session, because it was the first time I had played with Phil Woods in a long time," McPherson said. "We had played together maybe 15 years ago at a Newport jazz festival.

"I'm going to be involved with Lincoln Center again in October, because they are going to be featuring some of Charles Mingus' music, and I was the alto player with Mingus for about 12 years, off and on from 1960 to 1972."

The long association with Mingus didn't serve as much of a career springboard for McPherson, even if he is best known for his association with the highly regarded bassist and composer. McPherson made a

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Charles McPherson: Resurging saxophonist

Jazz

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number of fine recordings in the '60s and '70s for such jazz labels as Prestige, Xanadu and Mainstream, often featuring his compatriot from the Detroit scene, pianist Barry Harris. But until this year he had long been without the backing of a label.

"I signed with the company Arabesque and we went into the studio about six months ago," McPherson said. "The CD should be released in October. I had trumpeter Tom Harrell, pianist Michael Weiss, Peter Washington on bass and Victor Lewis on drums. We recorded quite a few originals, some old standards, some bebop literature and three Mingus tunes, 'Goodbye Pork Pie Hat,' 'Nostalgia In Times Square,' and 'Portrait,' a very pretty ballad.

"I should be releasing at least one or two albums a year. I had a self-produced CD about three years ago that I recorded live at Elario's, 'Illusions in Blue,' and it's still available. I still sell it myself."

As big an event as it is, signing a recording contract isn't the most important recent occurrence in McPherson's life. Since the birth of his daughter Camille about two years ago, his focus on music has broadened considerably.

"I would say that I have more of a sense that I need to do everything to assure I'll live a long life, so that I can see her as an adult and beyond," McPherson said. "Also, it has definitely made me just a bit more concerned about creature needs, like I'm thinking about college and how ridiculous the cost will be. I'm thinking about some very pragmatic things.

"I'm also more concerned about society. I've had to join the world in a way, where before I had the luxury of not necessarily participating. I could just be in my own little music world."

ANDREW GILBERT frequently writes about music for the Union-Tribune.