

POP



MUSIC

BLOWING HOME AGAIN

McPherson pairs with Harrell for rare San Diego gig

BY GEORGE VARGA, POP MUSIC CRITIC

It's a sad fact that Charles McPherson does not perform very often in San Diego, his hometown for the past 19 years. That can be blamed both on this city's less-than-vital jazz scene and on McPherson's busy touring schedule in the rest of the country — he regularly appears in New York's prestigious Jazz at Lincoln Center series — and in Europe.

But when the acclaimed alto saxophonist does perform here, the results are usually special. And when McPherson performs Saturday night at the Neurosciences Institute auditorium in La Jolla, his first area appearance in two years, the music should be more than special.

That's because he will be sharing the spotlight with veteran trumpeter Tom Harrell, who has been hailed as a "genius" by both drum great Elvin Jones and saxophonist Phil Woods, a former Harrell employer.

McPherson and Harrell have worked together on and off since first teaming a decade ago for shows with San Francisco pianist Larry Vuckovich, with whom they recorded an album called "Uptown Express." "We share the same language," McPherson, 58, said of Harrell, 51. "Tom has a lot of dimension, a great sound, he's creative and his (musical) heroes are my heroes. Whatever this 'X factor' that people can have is — an intangible musical chemistry — we have it."

But the language McPherson and Harrell share is essentially artistic rather than spoken. Diagnosed as a schizophrenic while in his early 20s, the Bay Area-born Harrell usually can speak only with great difficulty. A man of few words, on and off the bandstand, Harrell must take neuroleptic medication to counter such symptoms of schizophrenia as auditory hallucinations and disorganized behavior and speech. Regardless, Harrell's musical elo-

quence is as striking as his finely burnished trumpet sound, his improvisational approach and the respect he commands from his fellow musicians. His previous collaborators range from Stan Kenton, Woody Herman and Bill Evans to Lee Konitz, Horace Silver and Steve Swallow.

"Visually, he has such a dramatic presence — he almost looks catatonic," McPherson said of Harrell, who has at least a dozen solo albums to his credit. "If you don't know what (affliction) it is, you might think he had a stroke, because he stands like a statue on stage."

"But he's very intelligent, and it has no affect on his cognitive abilities. He's sharp as a tack, and he's brilliant. And in a setting involving musicians, everyone realizes that he takes his time to say what he's think-



MICHAEL OLETTA

"I like that extemporaneous element," says acclaimed saxophonist Charles McPherson. "It's really what the soul of jazz is."



MICHAEL IAN / BMG Records

"It's a joy to work with him," says Charles McPherson of Tom Harrell (above).

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ing. Because he's that way, he doesn't have a lot to say. But he tries, and he's funny.

"He shakes and has tremors, so he really has to warm up before he plays. He has to get in sync with his body, and he knows how to do that. But once he's ready, he plays great. To play with a trumpeter is my favorite combination, and it's really a joy to work with him. I'm certain there's a symbiotic inspirational thing going on, where I'm inspired by him and probably vice versa."

The repertoire for Saturday's concert will feature compositions by both McPherson and Harrell. And, McPherson predicted, they also will perform at least one or two pieces by Thelonious Monk.

"I always like to combine structure with some real spontaneous stuff," McPherson said. "To have things that are worked out, but also to just play. I like that extemporaneous element. It's really the soul of what jazz is . . ."

San Diego, "Bird" and Clint

Hailed for his mastery of bebop and his refined approach to collective improvisation, McPherson has long been considered one of the most graceful and accomplished alto saxophonists in jazz.

Born in the small Missouri town of Joplin, he began playing with noted pianist Barry Harris when he was 17. McPherson moved to New York when he was 20, and — a year later — began a professional relationship with jazz legend Charles Mingus that would last until 1974. He also has worked with Lionel Hampton, Count Basie, Art Farmer, Billy Eckstine, Nat Adderly and

many more.

McPherson moved to San Diego in 1978, and has lived here since. He resides in Talmadge with his wife, Lynn, a classical piano teacher, and their daughter, Camille, 5.

"I guess it's not depressing for me, because I don't rely on San Diego for my livelihood," McPherson said last week from New York, where he was midway through a weeklong appearance at the famed Village Vanguard club.

"If I was more locally grounded, where I *needed* San Diego, it would be depressing. It would be nice for the scene to be better. But I look at the fact that San Diego doesn't have a symphony. A city with all that money is not able to maintain a symphony. To me, if that's what happens with the cream of the crop of European music, and they have no care for it, then what do I expect for jazz?"

Like fellow San Diego saxophonist James Moody, McPherson is happy to live — rather than work — here. Coincidentally, both saxophonists are featured on "Eastwood After Hours: Live At Carnegie Hall," the just-released all-star double-album saluting filmmaker and noted jazz buff Clint Eastwood.

It was not the first time McPherson has been asked by Eastwood to perform on a project. The maverick actor and director also featured McPherson on the soundtrack of his acclaimed 1988 film "Bird," about Charlie "Yardbird" Parker.

"Basically, the concept was an evening with Clint Eastwood, and the music played was all from his films," explained McPherson, who performed "Cherokee" with a big band.

"It's not like I'm real close to Eastwood. But just from the little

superficial involvement I've had with him, I can see he's sincere about music and he genuinely likes straight-ahead jazz and bebop. And he's not real 'Hollywood-ish.' He's very natural and unpretentious. He's a rich man and has power, but he kind of acts like a regular guy, at least to us, to musicians. Now, how he acts to other film people might be different.

"He told me that the first time he saw Charlie Parker was at a 'Jazz at The Philharmonic' concert in the Bay Area, and that Bird just blew him away. He was flabbergasted, and he said it changed his life, really. What impressed him was the confidence Parker exuded, which was just magnetic. And Eastwood said he never forgot that, and that it influenced his concepts about filmmaking — that you have to believe in what you're doing and have no fear."