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Pianist shares his love of jazz

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Len Lyons

By ELIZABETH COSIN / Healdsburg Correspondent

When Len Lyons listens to jazz, he hears the genre's entire history and then some.

It comes from a lifetime of playing, listening, writing and appreciating the music and the musicians he has loved since he first heard them as a child.

For Lyons, an author, teacher and lifelong pianist, his most joyful moments are those spent communicating his passion to others and sharing his love for jazz and all it entails. He has found success teaching courses about it since 2007 in Sonoma County and the Bay Area. He also will be part of a jazz trio performing at the Healdsburg Hotel during the Healdsburg Jazz Festival in February.

"Exploring Jazz: An American Music," Lyons' six-week class through Healdsburg's new Osher Lifelong Learning Institute, begins Thursday at the Villa Chanticleer, meeting 3-5 p.m.

"I think I've developed a way to help other people enjoy the music," says Lyons. "I've spent so many years listening. I understand what it is that I love about it. It's many things, not just one thing, and I think this course has been so successful because I'm able to communicate what those are."

In it, he covers a wide range of jazz performers and styles, delving into the history of jazz from its birth in multicultural New Orleans through the big bands of the Midwest, modern jazz in Harlem and the turbulent, experimental 1960s.

But Lyons believes the most important part of the class is hearing the music. His goal is to teach students what he calls "active listening" — hearing a piece of music without any distractions and listening for certain qualities.

"People sometimes enjoy jazz without much effort because it is creative and energetic," says Lyons. "But it's one thing to instinctively enjoy it and another to really appreciate and understand its language. Jazz is a vague term for the whole of the music. It has to be given more specific meaning."

Lyons, 70, spent his formative years on the east coast before living and working in Berkeley. He discovered Sonoma County through friends Asher and Lyla Nathan, who live in Santa Rosa. He began to spend more time here when his son attended Sonoma State University and later settled in Sebastopol. Lyons also has a daughter in Cambridge, Mass., who is a writer and language arts teacher.

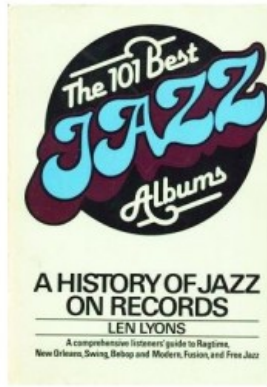
When the Nathans told him about the Osher Institute's classes at Sonoma State, he applied to teach a class, and now he returns every winter. Lyons' course has remained popular, with as many as 200 people in his class, many of them repeating it.

Lyons' own musical education began in West Hartford, Conn., where as a child he took classical piano lessons. His first epiphany came from an uncle named Lou Sigel who opened his eyes, and ears, to a different kind of playing.

"He really showed me how to play the music in a personal way," Lyons says. "He taught me that I wasn't just limited to what was necessarily on the page, that I could play it as I heard it, make it my own."

Lyons continued to play piano through college and, while earning a Ph.D. in philosophy at Brown University, took lessons from the famous jazz teacher Lennie Tristano, which meant a once-a-week, round-trip drive from Providence, R.I., to Queens, N.Y.

And while he valued the experience, Lyons says it took years before he became a better piano player. Not really thinking of himself a professional pianist, he landed a job teaching philosophy at Santa Clara University after graduating from Brown.



Among Len Lyons' books on jazz is this one, his first.

He was teaching and living in Berkeley with his wife, Maxine, when he decided to write. He carved out a niche writing about jazz for publications like the Berkeley Barb and the San Francisco Chronicle.

"I wrote about jazz because it was something I knew," he says, "but then I realized what I really wanted to do was write books."

As it happens, Lyons had a minor hit with his first book, "The 101 Best Jazz Albums: A History of Jazz on Records." It was published in 1980 and became an alternate selection in the Book of the Month Club. He published two more books on jazz, including one in which he interviewed the great jazz pianists Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, Teddy Wilson, Oscar Peterson and Dave Brubeck.

Lyons also wrote other things, including a how-to book on computers at a time when few people owned a personal computer, much less knew how to use it. The book brought him to the attention of Sun Microsystems, and he landed a job working in the publications department in the Boston area, where he stayed for 17 years.

Lyons says he returned to serious piano playing in his 40s, rediscovering the joy of making music. After leaving his job at Sun, he resumed playing regular Sunday jam session with several friends.

"We're a group of about seven or eight players who get together regularly," he says. "Sometimes we play gigs. But mostly we play in my basement, where I have a grand piano and a drum set. I'm really not motivated to play in public — I just love to play."

He limits teaching to the winter, returning to Sonoma County to "keep himself fresh," he says. Students who take his class get to hear him play. He's at the keyboard as class starts, playing for the students as they enter.

"I would have loved to have been a great jazz player," he says. "But what I think I do is help people to enjoy the music. I see myself more as a person who brings the experience of listening to other people, helps them hear and understand it. It's something that gives me a great deal of satisfaction."

Lyons also continues to write books on a variety of subjects. His latest, "The Ethiopian Jews of Israel — Personal Stories of Life in the Promised Land," grew out of Maxine's work with Jewish organizations. The couple hosted Ethiopian college students at their home in Boston, and Lyons says he became interested in how they were adapting to being black in a white Jewish society and their transition from the Ethiopian countryside to a modern society.

"I really felt it was a story that needed to be told about outsiders who don't seem to fit anywhere," he says. "I've always felt like I didn't quite fit in myself, and I think my own experience helps me to understand what these people have gone through."

For more information about Len Lyons' upcoming class or others being offered through Osher, visit sonoma.edu/exed/olli. Cost is \$80.

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