



**MUSIC**  
by Jim Reed  
Vibes/ Music Interview  
Wednesday May 23, 2007

## **It only seems we've touched the tip of the iceberg**

### **Local trumpeter Alex Nguyen debuts his new nine-piece jazz orchestra**

By Jim Reed

Ask Alex Nguyen to ponder why so many impressive young jazz musicians seem to come from the state of Florida, and before he answers, he'll tell you it's something he's wondered about himself.

That's understandable, as Nguyen (a celebrated young jazzman himself who earned international acclaim for his trumpet work while still in his teens) certainly weighed that information heavily when deciding where to attend college — eventually settling on the University of North Florida Jazz Studies Program under the direction of legendary artist Bunky Green.

“I think the schools do play a huge role,” Nguyen admits.

“UNF, where I just graduated from, has been one of the top jazz schools in the country for a while. Also, Florida State is developing a great program. It isn't just the colleges, though. I've heard some amazing kids in Florida high schools! It seems like jazz education is much bigger there. They even have jazz bands in some middle schools. I knew of only two high school jazz bands in Savannah when I was there.”

That relative lack of a major emphasis on jazz education proved to be of little hindrance for Nguyen, however. The Savannah native says he discovered the all-consuming world of jazz while in high school, and dove into it with a passion. Now, at the tender age of only 21, he's already participated in residencies for promising young players in both Washington, D.C. and Chicago, and won the 2005 International Trumpet Guild Jazz Competition.

He's performed at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts, the Clifford Brown Jazz Festival, the Jacksonville Jazz Festival, the Ravinia Festival, the Savannah Jazz Festival, Savannah Onstage International Arts Festival, and various venues in Asia.

And though since 2005 he's made a number of headlining club appearances here locally with his own small jazz combo, he's now taking a sizable leap forward by co-founding and leading the nine-piece Jazz Conceptions Orchestra — a brand-new group made up of a handpicked selection of some of the finer young musicians whose paths have crossed with his over the past few years.

It's a rather bold maneuver both artistically and logistically that posits Nguyen and band as risk-takers dedicated more to their craft than to the almighty dollar. The Jazz

Conceptions Orchestra will make their official Savannah debut this weekend at Kokopelli's on Broughton Street, a listening room and dessert bar Nguyen's been affiliated with since it opened.

The horn player says the idea for the nine-piece group came out of a conversation between he and three fellow players.

"We were up late listening to music and I think I mentioned it very casually and my friend Matt jumped at it. Then, it was a like floodgate opening. The four of us shared a constant stream of ideas for the band. We've all been in groups together, but we really wanted something that was different, yet still our own. Being best friends only fueled our excitement and after that night, something I said on a lark had become a reality in all of our minds. We started writing charts that week and began thinking of an ideal lineup."

Before long, Nguyen and company knew what they wanted to accomplish with such an "orchestra." Given the type of musical opportunities provided by having so many instruments to work with—and the idealism and seemingly boundless energy that can only come from youthful exuberance—it's not surprising their stated goals were more ambitious than pragmatic.

But then again, the best jazz is always more closely akin to walking a tightrope than taking the easy road.

Nguyen explains that this group has very clear goals in mind — not the least of which is to try and turn on young listeners who may be unfamiliar with the spirit and intensity behind much in the jazz idiom.

"When jazz was in the mainstream, there were big bands everywhere. You could go hear a band in a club or dance to their music in a ballroom. It's a rarity today because times have changed. People love the sound of a swingin' big band, but it seems like the whole idea of them is lost. When I think of big bands of the past, I think of places like Kansas City — where musicians would come up with arrangements on the spot. They were great players with a lot of soul and passion — just like today when you go hear an emo rock or an R & B group that's really into it and laying down their own thoughts and emotions."

Nguyen laments the rarefied air that all-too-often permeates today's jazz scene.

"Many guys are either doing more of a recital or are just fronting without having true ties to the music. Today, a lot of big bands play other people's arrangements, read the parts accurately and take a few solos. We want to recreate the vibe of the bands where all the players are great and they have the intuition to make some real music and go wherever it takes them."

"On top of being great players, everyone in this group can write, compose and arrange," he explains, adding that the Jazz Conceptions Orchestra features arrangements by almost every member in their live shows — whether those be of songs of their own creation, or merely their own unique renditions of melodies which audiences familiar with classic jazz may recognize.

"We do tunes that are considered more standard big band repertoire, plus small group

tunes we've adapted to our lineup, and even stuff outside the jazz idiom."

The bandleader says everyone in the group enjoys the challenge of putting their own spin on acknowledged classics ("It's such a rewarding feeling to write something you hear in your head and to have it brought to life by great musicians."). That's a time-honored tradition of musical evolution that is a key part of the jazz world.

Yet he becomes most animated when imagining what will likely come next for this forward-thinking group.

"It only seems like we have touched the tip of the iceberg. There are so many charts we want to write, and we haven't even gotten to our original compositions yet!

"The group size is unique. The nine pieces include two trumpets, trombone, three saxes (alto, tenor and baritone, but they double on other instruments like flute, clarinet and bass clarinet), piano, bass and drums. With that lineup, we can really explore different timbres in sound. We can have a large, traditional big band sound, or a mellow vibe like Miles Davis got with Gil Evans, or the sound of a small jazz combo.

"The audience can expect to hear a lot of blues with impromptu arrangements. Hopefully it'll convey the vibe I was talking about earlier. We're playing cool tunes like Miles Davis' 'Flamenco Sketches' or hard bop tunes like Clifford Brown's 'Parisian Thoroughfare' and several tunes from Cannonball Adderley and his group. It's a very diverse collection of music."

Although Nguyen proudly describes the orchestra as a collective "in the truest sense of the word," he says he wound up assuming the role of bandleader almost by default — but he's up for the challenge.

"I already have somewhat of a solo career, so it was decided my experience could help propel us forward. I get the gigs, run rehearsals, and have a final say about the direction of the group. But that should not minimize the role of all of these guys! They've been great about all the details required in an organization like this. It definitely requires a strong commitment, and that's something we deeply considered. They're all great players, and I think they're excited and devoted to this group."

Perhaps the best advantage in a "big band" of this unusual size and format is that its members can often react as they would in a smaller jazz group, affording them more musical options and opportunity for that all-important spontaneity.

"When I talk about 'dynamic interaction' and 'risk-taking,' I think about Miles Davis' group in the '60s," Nguyen continues. "They were really stretching the boundaries of jazz music and laid the groundwork for how we communicate in a modern small group. There are so many possibilities if you're in with great musicians that are sensitive and let the music—not their egos—take over. That is when a craft can become art. It is communication and creation on the bandstand. "

"I think we've come up with some cool things within this formula. Playing is always a puzzle to me, but related to what I said before: you can shoot yourself in the foot by thinking too much about it."

Nguyen says he's excited to return to Kokopelli's, which he describes as a fantastic place to see live music.

"There are less and less venues like this one, which focus on the music," he offers. "They have a nice grand piano, sound system, lights and stage that really showcase the bands. When the crowd is good and the band is swingin', it feels awesome. One of the reasons we made our group this size is because we wanted to be able to play in clubs. The exchange between the audience and the band in an intimate venue like this can be amazing."

He says that around here, when it comes to creating a bond between jazz musicians and their audience, there's no place better.

"You're getting a concert, but it seems like the artists are there just for you. I think the place is a great asset to the city and wish that more people were exposed to it, because I would love to see jazz music thrive in Savannah."

Alex Nguyen & the Jazz Conceptions Orchestra plays a 21+ gig at Kokopelli's Jazz Club Friday and Saturday, starting at 8 pm. \$15 at the door covers all three sets.