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MiraCosta jazz band named best in community colleges

A top music publication has named MiraCosta College home of the nation's best community college large jazz band, a recognition that comes just in time for the group's biggest local showcase of the year.

The honor comes in the June edition of DownBeat magazine, which named the 22-member MiraCosta Oceanside Jazz Orchestra, more commonly known as MOJO, as the top large jazz ensemble in the community college category.

In the small jazz combo category, DownBeat recognized MiraCosta's Jazz Collective with Outstanding Performance, the second highest award in the category, and named guitarist Arek Gralnic, 24, the best jazz soloist at a community college.

This is the third year in a row the school's musician have been recognized by DownBeat, which introduced the community college category in 2015, and the first year MiraCosta has won the top award.

The Jazz Collective and MOJO, which features Gralnic, will perform this Saturday as part of the 11th annual Oceanside Jazz Festival on campus, 1 Barnard Drive, Oceanside.

Free clinics and performances from visiting high school and college bands will be from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. in the Concert Hall inside the 2400 building. Guest artist Lenny Castro, a percussionist who has played with Adele, the Rolling Stones, Elton John, Stevie Wonder, Miles Davis and hundreds of others, will hold a clinic at 12:30 p.m.

In a ticketed event at 7:30 p.m., Castro will perform with MOJO and the Jazz Collective. For ticket information, visit www.oceansidejazzfestival.com.

Saxophonist and band instructor Steve Torok has seen the quality and size of the jazz bands grow since he arrived at MiraCosta in 2008, and he credits the success with support from the school and local talent.

"I believe it is all about student investment and ownership of the artistic output," Torok said. "This is why the yearly increasing acknowledgements from DownBeat are huge, because they are a quantifiable, outside evaluation of the musical quality of the groups. In other words it is not just me and other faculty, and their friends and families, telling them they sound good. And so success leads to success."

Torok described the band as a combination of older, seasoned local musicians who bring experience that helps the younger musicians. In turn, the enthusiasm of the

younger musicians inspire the older players, he said.

As an instructor at a school training potential professional musicians, Torok said he has a responsibility to teach students a variety of genres.

“Jazz as a style that, realistically, isn’t going to prepare you to make a living in music,” he said. “You have to be prepared to play all the contemporary styles, so in order to do that we incorporate the styles into the repertoire of both bands and make sure the students are ready to play funk and rock.”

Gralnic, who plays an Eric Clapton signature black Fender Stratocaster in MOJO, said winning the Downbeat soloist award was inspiring and the result of his teachers.

“The faculty’s been really good to me here, and they really look out for us a lot,” he said. “I’m just really thankful for this program. I just take it as inspiration.”

Gralnic said the school’s band is the best he’s ever played with, and he’s gotten better as a musician by performing with them.

“When I joined the applied program, someone asked me who am I listening to, and I said Mike Stern, the famous jazz fusion guitar player,” he said. “And the next year, I was playing on that stage with him because Steve brought him in.”

Gralnic said he plans to earn his degree at MiraCosta and hopes to have a career playing and teaching music.