

MiraCosta College creating a jazz tradition in North County

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New Orleans, Chicago, Harlem... MiraCosta College?

It may seem an unlikely association, but the Oceanside community college is becoming known for its jazz programs, which are gaining national recognition.

The school's instrumental jazz band has earned two awards from Downbeat magazine, and its jazz vocal group Frequency has been invited to perform at several prestigious shows. MiraCosta also is one of two community colleges in Southern California that host vocal jazz festivals.

The singers and musicians will be highlighted this year in the 11th annual Oceanside Jazz Festival, which kicks off April 7 and 8 at the school with performances from jazz choirs, including MiraCosta's Frequency.

The festival continues on May 8 with a jazz band festival that will feature the school's two bands, the Jazz Collective and the MiraCosta Oceanside Jazz Orchestra, also known as MOJO.

Details of the festival are at www.oceansidejazzfestival.com. Maps and parking information can be found at www.oceansidejazzfestival.com/maps.

The April 7 and 8 shows will feature 36 choirs from across the western United States in free performances from 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Ticketed performances begin at 7:30 p.m. and feature the quartet Vertical Voices on April 7 and Sara Gazarek with Josh Nelson the next night. Frequency performs both evenings.

The 23 singers and four musicians in Frequency have been busy rehearsing for their performances under the direction of Matt Falker, professor of piano and vocal jazz at Miracosta.

During a recent rehearsal, it was hard to imagine them sounding better, but Falker saw room for improvement.

“I’m looking at some of you guys and you’re standing with you’re knees bent, like the music hasn’t started because ‘My part hasn’t started yet,’” he said. “That doesn’t work. You’ve got to engage your body from the very beginning.”

At the end of the song, Falker shows he can be as supportive as strict.

“Good,” he said, praising by name several singers. “Very good. Good energy. I’m seeing some really improved energy today.” He then tells them to have fun.

Falker was teaching at the University of Southern California and California State University Northridge before being hired at MiraCosta in 2006. The music department was more focused on technology and production at the time, but the school had plans to open a new concert hall in 2010 and was looking to expand performances.

Saxophonist Steve Torok was hired in 2008 to lead the instrumental bands, bringing even more performers to the school.

Falker said the music program has grown from about 60 students when he arrived to about 130 this semester, and Frequency has more students than ever.

Laura Hellmers said she was a theater major at the school when she joined the choir about two years ago.

“I was so excited to hear there was a vocal jazz ensemble, and since then I think the word has gotten out,” she said.

Falker agrees, and said students are coming from as far away as Temecula and El Cajon to perform in Frequency.

Hellmers said she learned a lot about music in theater, but no where near as much as she's learned in the jazz choir.

"It's very difficult," she said. "Difficult rhythms. Difficult chords. It's just a lot more complex than other choirs."

Hellmers has changed her major to psychology since enrolling, and she hopes to continue her studies at a four-year school to become a music therapist.

Frequency was one of only two California choirs invited to sing at the California All-State Music Educators conference in San Jose in February, and the choir has been invited and performed at the New York Voices Jazz Festival in St. Charles, Illinois and the Rocky Mountain Jazz Festival in Alberta, Canada.

The school's instrumental band MOJO was invited to perform at the Jazz Education Network Conference, which Torok describes as the premiere jazz even in the world, when it was held in New Orleans and San Diego.

"They invite very few groups," he said. "I think we were one of only two community colleges invited as featured performers."

Torok said MiraCosta had a orchestra at its San Elijo campus when he arrived, but no other performing group. He's still working at building the music department's reputation, and some back-to-back national awards no doubt have helped.

For the past two years, MOJO has won the award for Outstanding Large Jazz Ensemble Performance in Downbeat magazine's new community college category. The April edition of the magazine will reveal if the band has won another award.

But the jazz program isn't just about chasing awards and performing in prestigious shows. Torok is proud that his musicians are routinely accepted

into four-year schools, and he has geared his program to teach them everything from 1920s to contemporary jazz to prepare them for commercial careers.

Torok said the program's success stems from the student talent, fellow faculty members, resources on the campus and support from the school. As a professional musician himself, he also admits to pushing his students to play their best.

"I really don't have a lower bar for what I expect from these guys," he said. "I have one bar, and they either meet it or I'm disappointed. I'm not a jerk, but it's about having really high expectations. I don't have to say, 'Well this is really great for a community college band.' I don't believe in doing that. I just want it to be great, period."

The May 6 performance will feature the MiraCosta Jazz Collective and MOJO playing with special guest Lenny Castro, a percussionist who has performed with Adele, the Rolling Stones, Elton John, Stevie Wonder, Miles Davis, The Crusaders, Quincy Jones, Wayne Shorter, and hundreds of others.