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Pianist Larry Vuckovich's new show pays tribute to jazz giant and old friend



Alexander Plackov/Courtesy of Larry Vuckovich

Bay Area pianist Larry Vuckovich will perform a tribute to sax great Dexter Gordon during a show at Yoshi's on Dec. 27.



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A conversation with Larry Vuckovich can feel like sneaking backstage at a nightclub to eavesdrop on your favorite musicians.

A mainstay on the Bay Area jazz scene for more than six decades, the pianist has spent his career accompanying some of jazz's most acclaimed artists, while recording an influential body of work as a leader. At 87, he's an essential link to a rapidly receding era, which he recalls in detail with bon mots, jokes and insights shared by his colleagues, and he wants to make sure that the giants who inspired and encouraged him get their due.

Vuckovich returns to Yoshi's in Oakland on Dec. 27 for a concert celebrating the centennial of tenor sax titan Dexter Gordon (1923-1990), whose 100th birthday passed quietly last Feb. 27. A formative experience playing with Gordon in Copenhagen's Club Montmartre left an indelible mark on Vuckovich. In the midst of several months traveling and performing around Europe in 1963, he passed a master class in accompaniment during the two-week run.

"In San Francisco I was working with people like Mel Tormé and John Handy," he recalled. "I had an idea about comping, but playing with Dexter was something else. What was so exciting was his strong melodic lines. It was like this big pull, a soulfully melodic engine pulling the whole thing."

For the Yoshi's show Vuckovich is performing with a stellar quintet featuring the tenor sax tandem of Steve Heckman, a New Yorker long based in the East Bay, and Oakland-reared Craig Handy, a top New York player who's best known for his extensive work with the Mingus Big Band; along with drum star Roy Haynes, and the all-star post-bop combo The Cookers.

They're joined by Belgrade-born bassist Buca Necak and Sacramento drummer Jeff Minniweather. The suave baritone vocalist Jamie Davis, who gained national attention during his 2000-2003 tenure with the Count Basie Orchestra, will also be on hand to croon some of Gordon's favorite songs.

A master balladeer, Gordon was known for his intimate acquaintance with the lyrics of every standard he played, often introducing a song by reciting the first few lines in his quietly amused rumble of a voice.



Born into an elite Black family in Los Angeles — his father was a prominent physician whose patients included Duke Ellington and Lionel Hampton — Gordon was the most influential tenor saxophonist in the years right after World War II, when he put his own charismatic spin on the turbo-charged modern jazz idiom known as bebop.

While his career was derailed by heroin in the 1950s, he re-established himself with a series of classic Blue Note albums after moving to Europe in the '60s. He'd kept his ears open, and it was clear he'd been listening to younger players, like Sonny Rollins and John Coltrane, who'd found their own voices after absorbing his influence.

"I actually got into Coltrane first and later learned that Trane's sound was influenced by Dexter," said Heckman, a big-toned player who started performing with Vuckovich in the '80s. "Though in the last five years I'm delighted I've been playing with him a lot more. He's playing the history of jazz piano. He's so grounded and plays with so much space and lyricism. He just doesn't clutter the canvas."

When Gordon moved back to the U.S. in the mid-'70s it was a triumphant return. Signed to Columbia, he was hailed as a bebop-era survivor who sounded better than ever, and was even nominated for an Academy Award for his work in Bertrand Tavernier's 1986 film "Round Midnight" (which was partly based on the saxophonist's experience as an expat).



The path to Gordon's stateside reemergence ran through North Beach and a series of extended engagements at Keystone Korner. While Vuckovich performed at the club often, his last time working with Gordon was at a festival in Austria in 1969 with the great Serbian trumpeter Duško Gojković (a performance later released on an LP).

Years later, when Vuckovich went by Keystone to hear Gordon in the mid-70s, "Dexter called me landsman," the German and Yiddish word for countryman, he said. More than a reference to the bond they shared as Americans abroad, Gordon's greeting hailed the pianist as a compatriot in swing, an honor that Vuckovich wears proudly almost a half-century later.

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LARRY VUCKOVICH

When: 8 p.m. Dec. 27

Where: Yoshi's, 510 Embarcadero West, Oakland

Tickets: \$25-\$49; yoshis.com

Also: Larry Vuckovich will perform solo 1 p.m. Dec. 23 on YouTube; the performance will be available to stream afterward, donations appreciated

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