

WATTS TOWERS ART CENTER REACHES ANOTHER MILESTONE (WITH 40TH ANNUAL MUSIC FESTIVAL)

By Ricky Richardson

The Watts Towers Art Center was in a celebratory mode this weekend, celebrating the 55 Anniversary of the Watts Towers Art Center, 35th Annual Watts Towers Day of the Drum Festival and the 40th Annual Simon Rodia Watts Towers Jazz Festival

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James Janisse and Kamau Daaood: Photo Credit, Ricky Richardson

Watts, CA. – The longest running jazz festival in the city, the **40th Annual Simon Rodia Watts Towers Jazz Festival** was held on Sunday, September 25, 2016. The festival was held in conjunction with the 55th Anniversary of the Watts Towers Art Center. The 35th Annual Watts Towers Day of the Drum Festival and the 40th Annual Simon Rodia Watts Towers Jazz Festival were presented by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and Friends of Watts Towers Art Center.

The Watts Towers Art Center is a cultural institution in Los Angeles and served as a beacon for the community. The venue continues to engage the entire community, residents, visitors and tourist with guided tours of the famous Watts Towers, children's activities, arts and crafts, and delightful array of mouthwatering food throughout the weekend.

The 40th Annual Simon Rodia Watts Towers Jazz Festival thrilled the crowd with a stellar line-up of world class musicians that represented the past, present and future of jazz, America's #1 Art Form.

James Janisse, Jazz Host and Kamau Daaood, amazing poet were Master of Ceremonies for the Jazz Festival.

The festival opened with a traditional Yoruba Ground Blessing Ceremony led by Alaadun and members of S.H.I.N.E Muwasi. Sherwood Sledge dazzled the crowd with a set of jazz standards, down home blues and took us back to church with some gospel music. Mr. Sledge demonstrated his powerful vocal range by roaming through the crowd singing without a microphone.

There is a saying “Jazz Made in America; Love by the World.” Look no further for proof of this featuring Jasmine Tommaso Quintet from Italy. The band featured Giovanni Tommaso, Lorenzo Grassi, Michael Ragonese and Andres Salazar for a set of classic jazz and a show tune or two.

I am always happy to see that jazz will continue to live on forever and ever. Los Angeles is rich with musical talent and the jazz community is all the better for it. Jamael Dean is a gifted pianist from a musical family, grandfather is drummer Donald Dean. Jamael Dean led a tight ensemble of young jazz lions to enthrall the crowd with a set of original tunes with plenty of room for the members to stretch out.

The global Afro-Cuban jazz and jazz community is delighted that relationship is improving between the United States and Cuba. The island is home to some of the most innovative jazz musicians blazing amazing trails for future generations. Dayren Santamaria is an incredible violinist. She is the leader of the group Dayren Santamaria & Made in Cuba. The group spiced up the proceedings with material from her debut, highly acclaimed CD. She was accompanied by Oscar Hernandez, piano/keyboards, Joey de Leon, congas/vocals, Sawa, bass and Jimmy Branly, drums, timbales.

Soulful vocalist Eloise Laws also comes from a musical family, a dynasty, if you will. Eloise captivated jazz fans with an entertaining set of jazz, blues and R&B.

The JMP All-Stars is a stellar group of in demand musicians who take time out of their busy schedule to mentor youth in the community by visiting local schools. The Jazz Mentorship Program All-Stars consisted of Patrice Rushen, piano, Ndugu Chancler, drums, Dr. Bobby Rodriguez, trumpet, Reggie Hamilton, bass and Justo Almario on saxophone. They capped of a splendid weekend celebration with some straight ahead jazz in its purest form. Doesn't get any better than that.

The Jazz Mentorship Program (JMP), now in its 24th year, teams professional master musicians with young people interested in this original form of American music and presents a combined academic and concert forum. One of only a handful of jazz education programs in the United States, it provides aspiring young musicians with an opportunity to interact and play with seasoned jazz professionals. An environment is created that is conducive to jazz artists, enthusiasts and young people alike.

The program's outreach efforts include going into communities to bridge the gap between older and younger generations and joining people of diverse culture together with one common goal- the appreciation of music, Founders mentors include Buddy Collette, Patrice Rushen, Ndugu Chancler, Sharon Hirata, Nedra Wheeler, and Dr. Bobby Rodriguez, Danellen Joseph, Rick Moss, Estella Holeman, Rosie Lee Hooks and James Burks. More than 450 world-renowned musicians have participated in program sessions. Currently, JMP also cosponsors the beginning piano classes.