

Drummer Jimmy Cobb swings into Detroit with MSU band



Mark Stryker, Detroit Free Press Staff Writer

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(Photo: MSU Music School)

JAZZ

The tag line that follows around drummer Jimmy Cobb these days is that he's the sole surviving member of the Miles Davis band that recorded the iconic "Kind of Blue," the 1959 LP that's been a talisman not only for jazz aficionados and musicians for more than half a century but also treasured by the whole of American culture. By all means, celebrate Cobb's longevity at age 86 and a career that includes landmark associations and hundreds of recordings with Davis, John Coltrane, Wes Montgomery, Cannonball Adderley, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan, Wynton Kelly and countless others, including more recent appearances with Detroit-born pianist Geri Allen.

But don't forget that even as Cobb heads toward his 87th birthday next month, he's still playing great and making jazz in the present tense. He's in residence this week at Michigan State University, and his activities will take him across the state, including a showcase Sunday performance in Detroit at the Carr Center with the MSU Jazz Orchestra 1 led by bassist Rodney Whitaker. The band's nickname, the Bebop Spartans, suggests

an ideal aesthetic match with Cobb, who was one of the defining drummers of the late '50s and early '60s.

Even in an era overflowing with A-list drummers, Cobb earned his place among the elite with his relentlessly swinging cymbal beat, a subtle and sophisticated command of touch and dynamics, masterful brush work and the ability to shape and support the music with a maximum of sparkling effect but a minimum of fuss. Cobb is best known for the distinctive way his ride cymbal beat was built around driving quarter notes. The effect was to at once dig a wide groove but also provide a kind of lift that elevated the bandstand.

Cobb may not be quite as consistent as he was in his prime, but he still makes magic. On his 2014 recording "The Original Mob" (Smoke Sessions), he mixes it up to exhilarating effect with a quartet of musicians in their 40s, including guitarist Peter Bernstein and pianist Brad Mehldau (both of whom were students of Cobb's at the New School in New York in the 1980s), and simpatico bassist John Webber. Performing with the MSU big band promises to open another window on Cobb's artistry. He's not usually associated with large ensembles, but Cobb did play on two of Miles Davis' classic collaborations with arranger Gil Evans in 1959-60, "Sketches of Spain" and "Porgy and Bess."

7 p.m. Sunday, Carr Center, 311 E. Grand River, Detroit. 313-965-8430. www.thecarrcenter.org. \$25 adults, \$10 students.

(Cobb and the MSU band will all appear at 7 p.m. Thursday at Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor and at 8 p.m. Friday at the Fairchild Theatre on the campus of MSU in East Lansing.)

CLASSICAL

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra and music director Leonard Slatkin turn their attention to Gustav Mahler's all-embracing Symphony No. 2 ("Resurrection"), a gargantuan piece on the metaphysical theme of rebirth, and calling for chorus, vocal soloists and huge orchestral forces. Soprano Melissa Citro, mezzo soprano Kelley O'Connor and Wayne State University Chorus join the DSO. The concerts also will mark the world premiere performances of Slatkin's own "Kinah," a 12-minute elegy that he has written in honor of his parents, the violinist-conductor Felix Slatkin (1915-63) and cellist Eleanor Aller (1917-95). They were among the rarefied elite of Hollywood studio musicians and half of the Hollywood String Quartet, one of the greatest mid-century chamber ensembles. ("Kina" is the Hebrew word for "elegy.")

8 p.m. Friday and 3 p.m. Sunday, Orchestra Hall, Max M. Fisher Music Center, 3711 Woodward Ave. Detroit. 313-576-5111. www.dso.org. \$15-\$50.

Brazeal Dennard Chorale: One of the cultural gems of Detroit, the Brazeal Dennard Chorale introduces new artistic director Alice McAllister Tillman at its 44th annual Holiday Concert. Tillman, a gifted soprano with a soaring voice, has long been an important part of Detroit's musical community. Her history with the Chorale dates back to her days at Northwestern High School, where the ensemble's founder, Brazeal Dennard, was director of the fine

arts department. Tillman will conduct the 40-plus members of the choir in a program of carols, classical works and spirituals.

4 p.m. Sunday, Marygrove College Sacred Heart Chapel, 8425 McNichols. 313-331-0378. www.brazealdennard.com

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Stirring 'Mahler 2' captures Slatkin, DSO at their best

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