

Big musical ambitions work out for jazz pianist

Five new members were inducted into the Mississauga Music Walk of Fame Sun. Sept. 8 during the Southside Shuffle. Port Credit resident Nancy Walker has been a stalwart of the national jazz scene for many years.

By JOHN STEWART
Staff

The 2008 National Jazz Awards ceremony, held at the Palais Royale in Toronto, was a bittersweet affair for jazz fans from Mississauga.

The program included a posthumous tribute to three jazz giants who had all lived in Mississauga at one time in their lives. The three were the incomparable pianist Oscar Peterson, the first person inducted into the Mississauga Music Walk of Fame, guitarist and jazz historian Jeff Healey, and Doug Riley, the talented writer and pianist who led the group called Dr. Music.

But while the Canadian jazz community paid tribute to those late lions that night, they also recognized another Mississauga musician, one who had five previous National Jazz Awards nominations.

That was the night that Nancy Walker was honoured as Canadian Keyboardist of the Year.

Interviewed the next day, Walker was typically humble. She made it absolutely clear she does not consider music appreciation to be a competitive sport.



Jazz pianist Nancy Walker is one of five Mississaugan's inducted to the Mississauga Music Walk of Fame last month.

She further made it clear that any one of the other nominees would have been just as worthy a winner.

In fact she pointed out that all of them "have awesome technique, much more so than I do."

But then she added something very telling: "Sometimes it's more a matter of people being moved by your playing on an emotional level."

Indeed.
If you look at the reviews of

Nancy's half-dozen CDs, issued roughly every three years since 1997, you will see her playing described as "instinctual, strong, expressive, full-bodied, contemporary, probing, contemplative, angular, harmonically savvy, lyrical and intrepid," to name just a few of the adjectives that professional critics have used to try to pin her down.

"She's very imaginative and dedicated to what she's doing," says her colleague Rosemary Galloway with whom she plays in the Jane Fair/Rosemary Galloway quintet. "Her style evolves constantly and it is a signature that is clearly her own. She seems to always be listening and collaborating with different players — so she's always expanding her horizons."

Walker was born and lived in Montreal until age 7 when her family moved to Oakville. She was always keen on music but as is so often the case, an inspirational teacher took a special interest in her talent and really incited her passion for it.

His name was John Macdonald. He taught at Blakelock Secondary School by day but was also a successful pianist and arranger who had worked with the likes of Rick Wilkins and Rob McConnell.

Walker played trumpet at the time but showed early interest in composition.

When she graduated from the Humber College jazz program she

started working right away in the cocktail lounges, bars and travelling show bands that were so much more plentiful in Toronto in the 1980s.

Then began a musical apprenticeship that saw her play with Parachute Club, Raffi, Sylvia Tyson and Roger Whittaker.

It was at that point in her career she met her future husband, outstanding bassist Kieran Overs, who already had an established career in jazz.

Since her first CD, *Invitation*, in 1997, she has shown steady progression in every recorded venture. Making, financing and distributing CDs in this age is not easy but Walker has made sure that there is a body of work extant that clearly documents her artistic growth.

In 2003, she won the prestigious Grand Prix de Jazz at the Montreal International Jazz Festival which landed her a contract with Canada's premier jazz label, Justin Time Records and led to distribution deals in the U.S. and Europe.

Walker has recorded with many of Canada's best jazz artists, is a festival regular who co-hosted the late-night jam sessions at the Ottawa Jazz festivals for years, was nominated for a Juno in 2006 for one of her "side" projects, works in several groups beside her own trio and is an adjunct professor at her alma mater, Humber College.

She is a professional student in the best sense of that term who has

studied with Fred Hersch, Jason Moran and Myra Melford.

Her writing is melodically, harmonically and rhythmically complex. Her colleague and friend Chris Chahley calls her work "challenging to players and listeners. It's often difficult music that requires attention."

He points out that "she is comfortable in so many different contexts. She is such a sensitive player. She can really feel what's going on and support it. She has that uncanny sense to play the right thing at the right time."

Her last CD, *New Hieroglyphics*, showcases that compelling voice in many contexts and is the work of the mature artist on top of her game.

In her first interview with *The Mississauga News*, it was pointed out to Walker that she wasn't the only talented piano player from Montreal who lived in Mississauga.

"I wouldn't put myself in the same sentence with Oscar Peterson," she hastily responded.

Peterson was, of course, in a class by himself in so many ways.

But there is absolutely no doubt that Nancy Walker is one of Canada's best players.

She may not put herself in the same sentence with Oscar Peterson, but Walker is going to have to get used to the fact that she richly deserves the spot of honour she now holds on the Mississauga Music Walk of Fame.