

Jazzing it up in Orange

Festival presents variety of talent

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer, Orange Transcript

The smooth sound of jazz moved over Main Street Saturday when the city presented a concert along South Essex Avenue.

The event featured performances by professional musicians and amateur performers from the city. But for anyone who stayed until the end of the event, it was evident that Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. unexpectedly stole the show by taking the stage to jam with the Cecil Brooks Band and holding his own as he played a saxophone.

Figuratively speaking, Jeffrey Dorch, the concert's master of ceremonies, said he witnessed Hawkins' transformation from a mild-mannered mayor into jazzman "Smooth Hawkins."

"This concert was about the community coming back together and understanding that we still have work to do to make this into an even better place," said Dorch. "The old and the new have to work together to get anything positive done. I've lived in Orange for 20 years and I've done things for Mayor Brown and Mayor Hackett, so how could I not do something for Mayor Hawkins?"

Hawkins accepted the applause and acclaim from the limited audience still in attendance at the end of the concert and declined several "encore" requests. He said the credit for his performance should go to Brooks, but he admitted he studied music and played the saxophone since he was a child.

"I don't know about this 'Smooth' stuff, but you can just call me 'The Mayor'," said Hawkins. "Since we formed our Valley Arts District, there's now a concentration of artist lofts, artists coming in at the Luna Stage and the Hat City Kitchen that borders West Orange, where Cecil's is located, and I've been back and forth so much between Hat City and Cecil's, that the jazz bug just got back into my system. I did play in high school, but that was many, many moons ago and I hadn't touched a sax in 13 years."

Hawkins deflected any compliments aimed at him to the festival itself and its organizers and the local businesses and vendors that participated in it and, "hopefully," profited and benefited from it. He and other city officials said the jazz festival presented many unheralded, yet very talented, residents to the community. They, along with the professional performers, proved once again their art is alive and Orange was willing to embrace them with open arms.

"The concert is an annual event and this was the second year that we brought it to Essex Avenue, on the side of the library, and down the street from the train station and the city's main shopping district," said Darrell Holcomb, director of the Department of Community Services. "The mayor got on the stage with the Cecil Brooks Band, but in the past we featured artists like Nikki Howard, Cecil Brooks III, 'Slide' Hampton, Bob Baldwin, Javon Jackson, Jackie Jones, and several other renowned jazz artists. Bob Baldwin is also a multi-Grammy Award winner. Even though we had some very prominent artists out here in the past, we're just trying to build this festival and enhance the Orange community as we move forward."

Campanella Godfrey, coordinator for the Office of Cultural Affairs, commended the many students from the Orange High School band who performed and the "steppers" from the school's dance teams who "did their thing," too. Godfrey added there was a "great" local singer, Adrina Clyburn, who attends Delaware State University, but visited to inspire her former classmates.

"Orange is a diverse community and we want to bring the whole town together," said Godfrey. "I and the mayor and the city believe the more people know about each other's heritage and cultural backgrounds and accomplishments the more understanding that it will foster and the more people will understand and appreciate each other. We're

trying to build a better, more cohesive community and one way to do that is to get people out of their homes to interact with one another at concerts and events like this.”

Holcomb said that a Caribbean concert is scheduled for Aug. 15 and a Spanish concert on Aug. 29 in Monte Irvin Orange Park.