

Oakland artist honors Bay Area jazz greats with exhibit

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OAKLAND — Question: If jazz is a "rare and valuable national American treasure of international importance" — as the Senate recognized in a 1987 resolution — what does that make the musicians who create it?

The answer, according to Oakland artist James Gayles is "treasures."

That is what prompted him to create a series of portraits, which "convey the deep raw emotions that fueled the music," dedicated to Bay Area jazz masters, particularly Oakland musicians.

The art show, "JazzMasters," opens to the public Thursday at the Swarm Gallery. Marcus Shelby — whose likeness is painted in blue against an old review of a Duke Ellington show — will be on hand for the reception with his quartet and Faye Carol (with every breath a true jazz singer).

Shelby also will be part of an artists panel discussion planned for 6:30 p.m. March 27 at the gallery with "Black Artists in Oakland" co-author Duane Deterville; photographer and musician Kimara Dixon; Oakland Public Conservatory of Music dean and trombonist Angela Wellman (whose portrait also is in the show); and arts columnist Wanda Sabir. Greg Bridges from KCSM and KPFA will moderate.

Gayles, a graphic artist for the Oakland Tribune, said he wanted to honor musicians who remained true to their art despite financial consequences.

Some are legends, others are less well-known but equally talented and represent the breadth of musical talent that inhabits Oakland:

- West Oakland's Sid LeProtti and his "So Different Jazz Band" — the first band in the world to include jazz in their title in the early 1900s.

- Pharoah Sanders, a sax man who moved to Oakland as a teen to study art and music at what was once Oakland Junior College.

- Eddie Marshall, who played with the greats and was a house drummer in the 1970s at the legendary San Francisco Keystone Komer club.

- Prince Lasha, a woodwind wizard, who put down roots in Oakland three decades ago in what he called a "mysterious move."

Like a jazz player, Gayles improvised putting the figures together with the backgrounds, which he called more raw, abstract and spontaneous than his style so far.

The work is "an important visual chronicle of a seminal art form that comes out of slavery — this country's style of slavery," said David Laub, a math teacher at Oakland Technical High School, during a special reception Friday evening at the gallery.

"Fascinating," was the word used by Betty Edwards, who came from Kansas in 1927 and just celebrated her 80-some birthday.

"Everything is so perfect — the colors, everything," she said.

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