

Caribbean jazz, home-cooked brunch rock Snow Pond Center for the Arts audience

Students at the 10-day intensive Caribbean Jazz Institute at the Sidney-based arts camp performed for a central Maine audience Saturday morning.

BY MEG ROBBINS
MORNING SENTINEL

SIDNEY — Internationally known musicians, up-and-coming Caribbean jazz students and Sidney, Maine — it's not exactly a combination the average person would expect.

But Saturday morning, all three came together at the second annual Jazz Brunch at the Snow Pond Center for the Arts.

The sold-out show featured performances from nearly 20 students participating in the Caribbean Jazz Institute at the Sidney-based arts center. Grammy award-winning drummer and composer Dion Parson, Saturday Night Live Band saxophonist Ron Blake and renowned steel pannist Victor Provost, all faculty members at the institute and members of the 21st Century Band, also made appearances. The institute, in its third year, is a 10-day intensive program for college and graduate-level instrumentalists — and the only one of its kind.

"There are hundreds of thousands of jazz camps, but no Caribbean jazz camps," Blake noted as he explained the origin of the artist residency program Saturday.

It's all part of a plan to make the Snow Pond Center for the Arts a "premier location for concerts in central Maine," according to Director of Development Christa Johnson, who said there's "more and more to come."

The audience dined on food and beverages Saturday, prepared on site at The Lodge — which will open to the public later this year, said Johnson. Fairfield resident Beverly Busque, who won season tickets to the center's summer programming, was one of a handful who stood up and danced to the grooves.

"I can dance to anything," she said, "and this is really good."

The Caribbean jazz musicians who were performing, several of whom have attended for all three years of the program's existence, study from 9 to 5 and often practice until as late as 11 p.m. during the week at the Snow Pond Center for the Arts. Blake said the days start out with ear training, taught by Provost, and go on to include practical applications of lessons, discussions about the music business, ensemble rehearsals and master classes in anything from rhythm to Senegalese percussion, which involves an entirely different system of reading and writing music.

"I work on just the basic elements — How do you really play and sound like you're playing tonally, how do you create tension, what's voice leading? — so it's almost like I'm trying to teach kids how to compose. I'm teaching them the basic elements of composition and Western harmony, but on their instruments — kind of like applied theory," Blake said. "But what a lot of them don't realize now is that the most important thing about playing here is not so much about the information that they're given, but the relationships that they're building."

These kinds of relationships are what started the Caribbean Jazz Institute in the first place. Gail Levinsky, program director of the Snow Pond Music Festival, and Blake both studied under saxophonist Frederick L. Hemke at Northwestern University in the late 1980s. After a reunion in 2012, the two formed a saxophone institute, which also takes place at the Snow Pond Center for the Arts. That connection later led Parson, a longtime family friend of Blake's, to Sidney. At home in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Parson is heavily involved with mentoring disadvantaged students who lack access to more advanced levels of music education.

Now the Snow Pond Center for the Arts hosts four summer programs that make up its namesake music festival: the Caribbean Jazz Institute, the Frederick L. Hemke Saxophone Institute, the



Morning Sentinel photos by Michael G. Seamans
Student musicians with the Caribbean Jazz Institute perform Saturday during the Jazz Brunch at the Snow Pond Center for the Arts in Sidney.



Ron Blake, the artistic director of the Caribbean Jazz Institute, speaks before its students perform Saturday at the Jazz Brunch at the Snow Pond Center for the Arts in Sidney.



Dion Parson plays the trumpet with other student musicians with the Caribbean Jazz Institute on Saturday during the Jazz Brunch at the Snow Pond Center for the Arts in Sidney.

Maine Chamber Music Seminar and the Snow Pond Composers Workshop and Creativity Seminar. There are a handful of other programs that also use the sprawling campus along the shore of Messalonskee Lake, including the New England Music Camp, which is now entering its 83rd year.

"Word is starting to get out," Levinsky said of the music festival. Each of the four programs now accepts just over half of all applicants, she explained. "We'd love to have the community more involved. This is the next generation of students performing. We need to support them."

Nayeli O'Shaughnessy, 17, who plays the alto saxophone and piano, said her first year participating in the Caribbean Jazz Institute has helped her grow as an artist. O'Shaughnessy is from St. Croix.

"It has been very beneficial because it opened me up to new knowledge that I didn't really understand when I was back in high school," she said. "It forced me to start to really take a look at and analyze what it is that I'm playing. With all that they've taught me, it's easier to just go through songs and improvise better. It also opened up my confidence. ... Before, in the ensemble, I would just stand still and show no emotion; but the more that you play, you just have more confidence in yourself the more you can show others that you love what you're doing. And that's what I want people to see — that I love what I'm doing. I'm trying to send a message to others that music is a great thing. Music is my passion, and I want others to feel what I feel when I'm playing music."

Lynnette Boschulte, who also plays the alto saxophone, said she has enjoyed her time in Sidney.

"It's been a phenomenal experience," the 27-year-old St. Thomas native said. "To come from an island and get an opportunity to come all the way up to Maine and learn from professionals in the field is just mind-blowing. And the way Snow Pond is set up, we're not only able to connect with them, but with other campers and experts in the other camps; so it's just been a mind-blowing experience."

Hezekiah George, a 19-year-old trumpet player from St. Thomas, said he has "lots of things to work on this summer" after attending the intensive camp at Snow Pond.

"I love playing with people who are better than me," he said. "That's the only way to improve."

Even for Blake, with years in the industry, traveling to Maine is refreshing.

"It's beautiful here," he said. "It's far enough away to really kind of — I think that isolation and getting away is important because what we're doing with the arts, it does require some contemplation. How (else) do you develop imagination and creativity and inspire people?"

During the summer, the Snow Pond Center for the Arts offers four free music concerts a week, on Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Ticketed events are scattered over the coming months, with "Broadway Under the Stars," up next on June 29 and Johnny Cash and Billy Joel tributes in August and September. These events will take place at the Bowl in the Pines, an outdoor amphitheater.