

# The Muskegon Chronicle

## Collins Foundation's annual concert delivers jazz without missing a beat

### REVIEW

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Spanning what has become decades, the Lawrence and Violet Collins Music Foundation continues to enrich our everyday landscape with a remarkable legacy of free concerts—the latest bringing pianist Butch Thompson and his New Orleans Jazz Originals band to the Frauenthal Theater.

After hearing Thompson in a symphonic forum when he appeared with the West Shore Symphony last spring, Muskegon audiences Wednesday got to see the esteemed traditional jazz pianist stretch out in a setting closer to the roots of the form for which he was born out of time. Namely, a program emphasizing New Orleans jazz.

Jelly Roll Morton, King Oliver, Louis Armstrong, Fats Waller, and Bix Beiderbecke, among others, all make their appearances—not so much tributes as ghostly apparitions clad both by signature tunes and lesser-known wonders. They were summoned by Thompson's stalwart collection of seasoned and spirited sidemen he calls The New Orleans Jazz Originals.

Vocal selections (including some clowning) added charm, but the



spirit of the performance, it was clear, sprang from further below - the fine balance between the arranged and the spontaneous, and hot collective and solo improvisations, highly charged with both affection for the music and affinity for one another.

Group selections were peppered with piano solos by Thompson, distinguished as always by their unassuming virtuosity and gently wry style, whether dipping into the delicious Jelly Roll Morton habanera "Creepy Feeling," or delivering a stunning stride version of the seasonal "It Came Upon A Midnight Clear."

Many of the selections were preceded by some variation of "we don't try to copy the originals because they're so good." To some degree, Thompson is only being modest. The New Orleans Jazz

Originals *are* originals. They play with authority, but in the sense of the word's root in the Latin for "creator."

It is in this regard that Thompson and his group compare without apology to the masters, and in some ways remain as close as any of us will ever get to hearing Jelly Roll Morton and his Red Hot Peppers or King Oliver and his Creole Jazz Band.

In the hands of the "Jazz Originals," we have a music so aware of itself that its history is free to come alive, leave, and leave behind only the timeless music. The museum glass which had protected it is carefully removed, and from it springs that motion from which even the most sedate listener is not free — even in the deepest blues was the unbridled beat of what rips the heart with joy.