

Four-mallet master wields jazz history at college

► Vibraphonist fuses swing with be-bop, adventurous harmonics

BY ROBIN CAUDELL
Press Republican

PLATTSBURGH — The Montreal Jazz Festival lags behind SUNY Plattsburgh in honoring vibraphonist Warren Chiasson, the featured guest artist at the 2012 Winter Jazz Concert on Friday evening.

Called “one of the six top vibraphonists in the last half century” by the New York Times, Chiasson, a native son of Cape Breton, has yet to perform on one of Montreal’s sultry summer jazz stages.

He has, however, performed at festivals around the world and was in George Shearing’s 1959 outfit at the legendary Newport Jazz Festival.

He has met and played with almost everyone in jazz and brings a rich cache of stories to Dr. Rick Davies’s students in Mambo Combo and Jazz Ensemble.

‘WONDERFUL RIDE’

“It was a wonderful ride being out there and meeting all these great musicians on the road,” Chiasson said. “In those days, you go to places like the London House in Chicago and stay a whole month and get an apartment or condo, and you settled in.”

Across the country in West Hollywood, he and double bassist Wyatt “Bull” Ruther got an apartment at the Chateau Marmont.



PHOTO/JOE RYBCZYK

Warren Chiasson

“On Sunset (Strip) was Gene Norman’s Crescendo. People were coming in all over the place. We had a large apartment down the road from Sunset Strip, where we were playing. Boris Karloff was coming in the lobby. It was a great time to be alive, and playing music was like a dream come true for me.”

Chiasson was far from his Acadian roots.

“I did grow up with that culture. The first five years of life, French was my first language. I’m the first

IF YOU GO

WHAT: 2012 Winter Jazz Concert directed by Dr. Rick Davies and featuring renowned vibraphonist Warren Chiasson.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Friday.

WHERE: E. Glenn Glitz Auditorium, Hawkins Hall, SUNY Plattsburgh.

ADMISSION: Free.

WEBSITE: www.warrenchiasson.com

person to come out of that area to forge a professional career in jazz. In 2006, they brought me in and honored me. I appeared with a big band.”

BIG BAND NUMBERS

Friday evening, he will be playing Big Band charts.

“In addition, I will be doing some small-group stuff. Rick has a good Latin background. Carol Novak, she’s the wife of Larry Novak, a brilliant piano player out of Chicago and a very good friend with Oscar Peterson. Carol, unfortunately, passed away a number of years ago with breast cancer. She left wonderful bossa novas.

“I will be playing ‘Garden of Dreams’ and ‘Samba del Sol.’ It’s going to be great.”

YOUNG MUSICIAN

His first instrument was the violin. At 13, he did swing and scotch-fiddle music gigs.

“I was only in my mid teens when I was just started to get in jazz. I really liked the sounds of the vibes by George Shearing’s Quintet. I love the percussion feel about it. It has a wonderful melodic quality to it. That coupled with wonderful music. George Shearing structured a lot of his music on the bass lines of Johann Sebastian Bach. That combination was so great.”

Chiasson and his equally young cohorts formed a George Shearing Bop Club.

“Bop was very hot in those days with Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Brown and Charlie Parker. In our mid teens, we were hearing wonderful music like that.

“There was a promoter in our area in the early ‘50s. He really liked the big bands — Louis Armstrong with his sextet, Duke Ellington, Ted Anderson, Johnny Hodges. He brought in Lionel Hampton. He just blew me away with his wonderful rhythm, fervor; his choice of sideman was just fantastic.

“A lot of them just became big stars, Bennie Olson, Clifford Brown; I could go on and on.”

Like the other Bop Club members, Chiasson was racking in the autographs of his musical heroes.

“Benny Goodman came with two vibraphone players: Terry Gibbs and Don Elliott,” Chiasson said. “We had some good vibraphone players come to town. I was smitten. I said that was it for me.”

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