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Guilford's New Duke to jazz it up at New Haven's Sprague Hall

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NEW HAVEN >> Abstract. Avant garde. Impenetrable.

It's how a lot of people view jazz. And Guilford musician Brian Torff wants to change that.

Torff is the musical director and arranger for New Duke, an accomplished eight-piece band that infuses the work of legendary composer, bandleader and pianist Duke Ellington into funk, hip-hop, rock, reggae and other contemporary sounds. The ensemble will be performing at Yale's Morse Recital Hall in Sprague Hall on the evening of Friday, Dec. 4 in a concert presented by the Yale School of Music.

"Duke's blend of melodies, rhythms, and sonic movements gave audiences a new experience—complex yet accessible jazz that made the heart swing," said Torff, a bassist whose musical chops have taken him to Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, and the Kennedy Center, in a telephone interview. "You can't replicate his music, but you can build on it in new ways, and that's what we try to do."

Hence, the mashups, or, as Torff put it, "songs made from bits of other songs." Said the long-time professor of music at Fairfield University: "We play Duke Ellington's music but we mash it up with Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, James Brown, Pharrell Williams, and whatever else I throw in."

Given the high standard of musicianship in the group — vocalist Darryl Tookes, for example, recorded with such legends as Sting and Paul Simon, while Rick Sadlon has plied his alto sax and flute for, among others, Lionel Hampton and Dihann Carroll — "the possibilities are endless."

It's not so different from how Ellington distinguished himself as an iconoclastic genius, synthesizing disparate elements of American music—the minstrel song, ragtime, Tin Pan Alley tunes, and the blues—into his own unique sound.

A unique sound combining artistry and entertainment and—most important to Torff — joy. "We aim toward an engaging performance that invites the audience to come along with the musicians. It is basic human communication, call and response," he said.

The objective, in other words, is to play to the audience and not above it. "People want to hear great jazz, but they also want to feel good, maybe even uplifted."

Watch a YouTube clip of Torff's original "Working On a Baseline," a rocking soul-funk tune that tells the

story of jazz bassist Milt Hinton and his ascent from Mississippi to fame, and it's clear New Duke is doing just that—and having a ball besides.

Feel your toes tapping to “Rockin’ in Rhythm,” a track that imbues Ellington’s classic tune with the 50s rock lyrics from Chuck Berry, Big Joe Turner, Elvis Presley, and a dash of Louis Prima, and you begin to sense that the palpable enthusiasm exuded by the members of New Duke in the music is contagious.

No wonder that’s the effect, with a virtuoso lineup of Tookes, Sadlon, and Torff, along with Jamie Finnegan on trumpet and flugelhorn; saxophonist Steve Moran; John Fumasoli on trombone; pianist and keyboard player David Childs; and Greg Burrows on drums.

And no surprise that New Duke, in just its fourth year of existence, has been invited to appear at a host of jazz festivals, concerts, and National Endowment for the Humanities-sponsored workshops.

“We’re doing something different,” Torff said. “We want to present something to the audience so they say ‘I get it, I love jazz.’”

“I hope, I think, we’re onto something.”

New Duke will perform at 7:30 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 4 at Morse Recital Hall in Sprague Hall at 470 College St. New Haven. Willie Ruff is the director of the Ellington Jazz Series.

[Tickets are available online here](#) or by calling 203-432-4158, or from the box office at 470 College St. New Haven.

For more information on New Duke, visit newdukemusic.com.

URL: <http://www.nhregister.com/arts-and-entertainment/20151203/guilfords-new-duke-to-jazz-it-up-at-new-havens-sprague-hall>

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