

## Friendship put Dakota on map

Founder Lowell Pickett will celebrate the club's 25th birthday with an old pal who helped start it all, piano legend McCoy Tyner.

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When McCoy Tyner brings his ensemble into the Dakota Jazz Club this week, it will be a rare chance to see a modern master -- a former member of John Coltrane's fabled quartet and the most influential pianist for generations of jazz players -- up close and personal.

However, it may not seem so special for patrons of the Dakota, who have had the luxury of watching Tyner numerous times in the past two decades. It is appropriate that the popular nightspot is bringing Tyner back in honor of its weeklong 25th anniversary celebration, for without the close, generous friendship that developed between the legendary pianist and Dakota founder Lowell Pickett, the club might not be in business today. Certainly it would have a much lower profile.

The relationship goes back to 1976, when Pickett learned that local promoters were trying to fill an open date at the Guthrie Theater. He suggested Tyner, having "just been blown away" by a concert in New York. When the promoters claimed they didn't have anyone to do the legwork, Pickett -- who'd staged four or five shows at an armory in Northfield, Minn. -- offered himself.

"I said, 'If the show makes money, pay me. Otherwise, don't worry about it.'"

The concert was a success. Moreover, Pickett and Tyner found out how easily their conversation flowed and how much their taste in food and the arts were in alignment.

"We stayed in touch and got together when we could," Pickett said. Tyner even tried to get him to move to New York while they worked together on a film about the developmental path of jazz relative to classical music (the plans fell apart at the last minute due to lack of funding).

## **Modest beginnings**

But Pickett stayed in the Twin Cities, and eventually opened the Dakota in 1985 at St. Paul's Bandana Square (the club moved to Minneapolis in 2003), where it quickly became a destination for local musicians and listeners.

"I never thought we would do national jazz. Never," he recounted a few years ago. "But I got a call from an agent, this was in 1988, and he asked me if we did national jazz. I said we weren't big enough. He said maybe you could do two shows in a night. I said nobody does that here, it wouldn't work.

"He kept pushing and pushing for this, and then he mentioned McCoy Tyner as a possibility and I got really offended. I told him, 'You don't have to tell me anything about McCoy Tyner. I know what a major part of American music he is, and in fact he has been a friend of mine for about 10 or 12 years. It would be a tremendous honor for him to play at the Dakota but it isn't going to happen for all the reasons I have just explained to you and because I can't afford it. And for you to push him out there like he is some kind of insurance or used car is offensive to me and an insult to him. I think you owe him an apology.' And then I hung up on him.

"About two weeks later, the agent called me back. I can still remember the odd tone of his voice. He said, 'I talked to McCoy last night. He told me that if you want him to come play at the Dakota then we shouldn't worry about the money. Whatever you think might work would be fine with him, so long as you make sure you get him the right piano.'

"So McCoy came and played three nights and it wasn't expensive, like \$10 and \$8 [ticket prices] for the two sets," Pickett says, his voice warm with the memory. "I got him a Steinway piano and went out and picked him up at the airport. I remember his bassist, Avery Sharpe, asking me who else had played there, and I told him, 'No one. You are the first.' I was so nervous. The last thing I wanted was for McCoy to be embarrassed here when he belonged at Orchestra Hall or the Ordway. But the room was nearly full for most of the shows and McCoy liked it.

"'You can do this,' he told me."

### **The butterfly effect**

Soon the agent was on the phone again: "McCoy said that the room was beautiful, Lowell was great to us, the chef is a genius and he'd be back to play anytime," Pickett recalled.

"This agent also represented [pianist] Ahmad Jamal, who greatly respected McCoy, and so Ahmad came to play here. Then Ahmad and McCoy both knew [saxophonist] Bobby Watson, and so after a local friend of Bobby's urged him to come play here, he checked around with them and he came to play here. Then Bobby gave me the phone number of [singer] Betty Carter, who told me she would only come once. Right before she came, she won a Grammy. But by the third night of shows, she was sitting there with a glass of wine afterwards and said, 'I love this place.'

"That's how we started booking national jazz acts at the Dakota," Pickett said. "We started at the very top. All because of McCoy."

Last year, when Tyner was preparing to play Orchestra Hall -- the place Pickett considers his rightful venue -- the club owner's name came up during an interview.

"I always enjoy coming to Minneapolis and Lowell has a lot to do with that," Tyner said. "We need people like him, who keep everything rolling. Lowell is very loyal to the music."

This week the music, in the form of McCoy Tyner, is once again rewarding that loyalty.