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MUSIC

HOME KEYS

TOP JAZZ PIANIST AND AMBASSADOR JASON MORAN
HITS HIS HOMETOWN HOUSTON IN HOMAGE TO A LEGEND.

By Tara Seetharam



One could say jazz pianist Jason Moran, 39, was destined for the genre: The Houston native visited his first jazz club before he was born, when his pregnant mother attended a concert by saxophonist Pharoah Sanders. At age 6, he took to the piano. His passion for “attention-demanding” jazz grew, leading him to the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts and, later, to Manhattan.

A decade and a MacArthur Fellowship later, he finds himself in the high-profile role of artistic advisor for jazz at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, DC, where he organizes all of the programming. “I really am a spokesman for the music, which is more than I bargained for,” he admits. “It’s forced me to grow up.”

But even grown-ups need some fun. Moran is jetting in from his home in Harlem to bring the Fats Waller Dance Party to Discovery Green (1500 McKinney St.) May 16. Along with bassist and vocalist Meshell Ndegeocello, he’ll pay homage to the legendary piano player. (Moran will also honor Waller in his record, *All Rise: A Joyful Elegy for Fats Waller*, due in September.) The gig will crown Discovery Green and Da Camera of Houston’s Jazz Appreciation Month concert series, and will feature Waller’s most memorable songs—infused with a few pumps of danceability. The HSPVA Jazz Combo will open the show.

During his trip to H-Town, the father of identical twin boys and husband of classical singer Alicia Hall Moran, currently starring in the national tour of *Porgy and Bess*, plans to feast. He’ll hit Frenchy’s for fried chicken, Shipley’s for doughnuts and trendy restaurant The Pass & Provisions—and snag some home-cooked ribs from his dad. “I’m already full,” he laughs.

He hasn’t been able to shake those Southern roots on the East Coast—“I say ‘y’all’ all day”—because he immerses himself in a community of transplanted Texans. He credits this circle of artists with an emerging sound that mixes jazz, R&B, soul, gospel, electronic and even country music; he’s been on a Waylon Jennings kick as of late. “I’m trying to reconcile my outlaw country leanings,” he says, hinting at new music that might go in a grittier direction.

But he won’t abandon jazz. He’s still enamored of it—partly because it so engages the audience. “Jazz is one of America’s greatest abstractions,” he says. “It challenges its audience to follow the strands of music.”

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