

The Genius of Gershwin in the Hands of Peter Nero

“I’m one of a dying breed” Peter Nero told me over the phone in July. I felt the truth of his statement and wanted music lovers to fill the house and enjoy a possibly once in a lifetime opportunity to hear the one and only Peter Nero on the beautiful Steinway concert grand at the Whitefish Performing Arts Center on Saturday, September 12th.

Fame came early for Peter Nero. “I came along at the right time,” he told me. When Peter was 17, and a scholarship student at The Juilliard School of Music in New York City, he participated in a contest run by the classical New York radio station WQXR called “Musical Talent in our Schools.” Contest judges were top names in the music world including Arthur Rubinstein and Vladimir Horowitz who became an ardent Nero fan and Peter’s lifelong idol.

Peter won that contest and several others and came to the attention of Paul Whiteman who hired Peter to play Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* with his orchestra for a TV special.

The music director of WQXR at the time was the excellent classical pianist Abram Chasins. Besides being impressed by Peter’s classical performance, Chasins was moved by the music that flowed out of Peter’s fingers as he warmed up at the piano. He wrote, “What I heard was an improvisation that disclosed a strong poetic musical individuality. “

Peter wanted to learn, and persuaded Chasins give him some tips and recommend a teacher. The best teacher he could think of was his wife Constance Keene. Not only did she give Peter five years of priceless musical and technical instruction, but she and Abram encouraged Peter to be himself, to honor his playful nature and allow his creativity to make the best of all the worlds of music he could hear.

“I heard George Shearing at the age of 15, and was fascinated by his harmonics. I was playing in bands by the time I was thirteen, at weddings and bar mitzvahs in Brooklyn.” Peter told me. He explained that listening to a recording of George Shearing, he could pick out chord voicings and learn his arrangements. But later, when he discovered Art Tatum, “someone who was on a par with the best classical pianists, with a rhythmic sense and harmonic invention that were beyond belief,” it wasn’t so easy. Vladimir Horowitz also admired Art Tatum, and would pay to hear him in the clubs. Here was a jazz pianist on another level.

Peter Nero recorded his first album in 1961 and won a Grammy Award that year for “Best New Artist.” He’s received two Grammy Awards and ten nominations, as well as an Emmy award for starring in the NBC Special, *S Wonderful*, *S Marvelous*, *S Gershwin*.

Peter Nero has recorded seventy albums, some with funny names like *Scratch My Bach* and *Hail the Conquering Nero*. His career has been unique, not so much planned as intelligently negotiated to never have to sell out. “I won’t sell out!” he told me.

Nero wrote the score for the 1963 Jane Fonda film *Sunday in New York* and was in the film playing himself. Nero’s theme song according to the New York Times was “more memorable than the script.”

Peter Nero appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show eleven times, was a favorite of Johnny Carson, Perry Como and Dinah Shore and the Oprah of early TV, Ohio talk-show host Ruth Lyons. He became a piano icon miraculously generating that fame and success by being himself. He was trained to be a classical concert pianist, but his concerts transcended musical genre into a masterful style all his own.

When times and tastes changed, Nero adapted. He’s very proud of studying conducting with the brilliant Swedish conductor Sixten Ehrling who said of Nero in *Keyboard Classics* “There are hundreds of pianists who have extraordinary technical abilities, but Peter has a rare combination: a fantastic technique, a unique touch, and a penetrating musical intelligence. You can hear his knowledge of orchestration when he plays,”

Using that talent to orchestrate and entertain, Peter Nero became the founding conductor and Artistic Director of the world renowned Philly Pops entertaining audiences for 34 years doing double duty as pianist and conductor until he retired from that position in 2013.

Nero is included in two historic walks of fame, one in Philadelphia and one in Miami. In 1999, he received the Pennsylvania Distinguished Arts Award. He’s got six Honorary Doctorates, and the prestigious International Society of Performing Arts Presenters Award for “Excellence in the Arts.” In 2009, Nero was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Federation of Musicians. He’s performed in concert halls all over the world.

I asked Peter if he considered himself a jazz pianist, and he replied that he would give me the same answer George Shearing used to give. He said, quoting Shearing, "Pardon me, but that's not how I refer to myself. I am a pianist who plays jazz." And he plays classical, movie themes, musical theater and more. It's all music and all available for creative exploration. And under Peter Nero's fingers, it's all amazing and inspiring. Bring all the young pianists you know to this concert.

George Gershwin was also a pianist who could draw from different genres. He brought together the passion of jazz and the sophistication of classical music when he wrote *Rhapsody in Blue*, a masterpiece containing sweeping themes of American musical history which was commissioned by Paul Whiteman. Peter Nero is the only living pianist who has performed *Rhapsody in Blue* with Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra.

One of the world's top interpreters of Gershwin, Peter Nero will perform an exciting all Gershwin program in Whitefish. He will be accompanied by Seattle bassist Michael Barnett who has been his bass player for twenty five years. As Peter said to me, "Mike and I are hand in glove." After graduating from Yale University, Barnett lived and worked in Kansas City, Missouri and gained considerable experience from the classic era of Kansas City jazz. In Chicago, he worked with Eddie Higgins, Billy Wallace and the legendary Carmen McRae. He's toured extensively with the late Pearl Bailey and Louie Bellson. He's a great bass player, musically strong and always willing to support Peter's musical inventiveness, and somehow able to keep up with him while throwing in inspiring ideas of his own.

Katherine Strohmaier will be providing selected vocals. "I like Katie very much" Peter told me. Katherine Strohmaier is a Seattle-based singer and actor. She's appeared with pops orchestras throughout the United States including with the Seattle Symphony appearing in a tribute to Marvin Hamlisch conducted by Larry Blank in 2013. She is also a voice instructor, pianist and music director at the Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle.

Mel Torme said of Peter Nero, "Peter Nero's piano interpretations of Gershwin are unique and glorious. He is a one of a kind artist." One of a kind indeed. Peter Nero is always aiming for excellence and always communicating a thrill the

audience can *feel*. He's a brilliantly creative improviser, a master of the classics who embraces the freedom of jazz improvisation with its marvelous harmonies and rhythms who takes his music where it wants to go, or he wants to take it. Lucky for us on September 12th, 2015, it's Whitefish, Montana.