

XEROX ROCHESTER INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL » THE ARTIST

# Artist and jazz musician Tom Tosti captures the mood and movement of the festival with his on-the-spot sketches



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A black marker is streaked across the page in long, fluid lines, flushing out the lid of a grand piano. Lighter brown, sideways strokes depict a bass, one that a man in a suit and glasses looks to be hugging. A black blotch marks the bass drum, next to smaller drums that seem to be suspended in air. A head with black hair peeks out from behind aymbal.

The brown squares on the page are indicative of the paneled walls of Kilbourn Hall. Sitting at the piano is a sketch by area artist Tom Tosti, who attends the jazz festival each year with white paper pads and colored pens in tow. He busily draws the artists in action during their sets, challenging himself to get the picture right in the condensed hour of a jazz set, often in less-than-ideal drawing conditions. He's been sketching artists for each of the festival's nine years, starting with the event's first ever show in 2002 of pianist Renee Rosnes.

"My style can be considered gesture," he says. "There's a lot of gesture in the drawings. There is movement and you try to capture the moment." Flipping through his pads is a visual history of the festival — as he recalls the names of artists, the style of music comes through, whether it's straight-ahead jazz or something more ethnic. Some are simple outlines in black pen; others are detailed representations filled in with color. He captures the flavor of

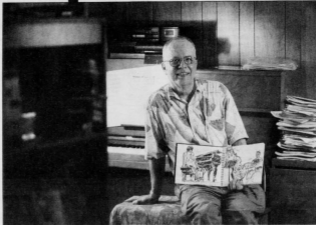
the festival and the mood of the music in his sketch books, relying on the sound and feeling of a concert in ways that literal photographs cannot.

On-the-spot drawings can be risky, and Tosti is motivated by the challenge.

"There's a certain risk, a tension that you might not get a good drawing because people are moving around and you only have so much time to do it," he says. "You could fail at doing a really good drawing. After about the third drawing, your hand gets attuned to eye-hand coordination, you get better. Trying to prove your skills is the challenge."

The better the concert, he says, often the more inspiration he gets for his drawings, but it can backfire. "When the music is so good, it's hard to draw," he says. "When you're drawing, the

# Drawing on experience



Tom Tosti, above, holds one of his sketches at his home in Rochester. Tosti has been drawing RIF musicians, such as Monty Alexander in 2005, top photo, since the beginning. CARLOS ORTIZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

emotional impact, the percentage is less. You have to stop and really listen."

Tosti has ulterior reasons for wanting to listen to the music. He's also a jazz pianist.

"Artists, they have two mediums," he says. He performs occasional gigs at area restaurants, teaches jazz piano and volunteers his playing to help those with developmental disabilities. Last year, he participated in the jazz festival's Jazz Star talent search, and his videos can still be seen on YouTube.

Tosti started piano as a kid, learning first from his mother, Elise Tosti, who was a Rochester-area piano teacher. His father was a trumpet player who organized a big band. Even with all the musical influences in his family, he wasn't motivated to practice. "My mother wasn't a taskmaster," he says. "It's taken me a while to catch up with my general skills as a pianist."

Both his siblings are musicians. His sister will be singing

true."

When he returned, Tosti was hired for a short time at the Rochester Museum & Science Center. He finally decided to pursue music more formally, studying at Nazareth College and taking classes at the Eastman School of Music.

"Then I landed a job where I could use my skills in art and music, a day program at the Arc of Monroe," he says. Ever since, he's been working with people with developmental disabilities in various roles, incorporating his love for art and music, a self-appointed music and art therapist before the field was formally created.

With a love for both jazz and drawing, it was inevitable that he would eventually combine the two.

He's been drawing musicians since the 1970s. His boxes full of notebooks include a drawing of Dizzy Gillespie from the 1970s in Eastman Theatre. Many other big-name musicians sprinkle the pages. And he's active in drawing area musicians and hopes to eventually publish a book of Rochester jazz musicians.

While flipping through his art books, every musician turns up memories, but he has a particular soft spot for vibraphonist Joe Locke: "Diz me, the most exciting jazz musician I've ever seen, and he's a Rochester boy," Trombonist Steve Turre was another of his favorites over the years, but "I don't think I was able to get a drawing," he says. He was too engrossed in the concert.

"Tosti doesn't sell his pictures. Instead, he's often given them to the musicians, or lately, he'll send a copy to them after the festival. He says it's taken him time to build up confidence as an artist. The artists are often willing to sign the pictures, and Tosti says that they're always extremely gracious.

For many artists, sketching is a basic process, something preliminary that helps flesh out a larger work. For Tosti, it's his art. He is able to fully realize and compose the live moment and translate jazz into a visual experience. "Drawing, it was used as a process," he says. "Like a person does exercises on a musical instrument, it's keeping yourself visually attuned to eye-hand coordination. For me, it's become what I concentrate on."

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## MORE ONLINE

To see more of Tom Tosti's sketches, click on this story at [Democrat and Chronicle.com/jazz](http://DemocratandChronicle.com/jazz).

with the Greece Jazz Band during this year's festival.

Tosti attended the Rochester Institute of Technology to become a graphic artist, graduating in 1966. He used piano playing as an outlet during his studies. It was at school where he developed his talent for sketching.

"I remember at school, RIT, I studied drawing. I had to keep the sketch book," he says. "I enjoyed that a lot, I kept it up. It was one of the most enjoyable things in art school."

After art school, he entered the Army and was sent to Vietnam as a support troop. Though he wasn't necessarily in support of the controversial war, art played a roll in his decision to enlist. "Someone told me that you can do artwork eventually in the Army," he says. "But it's not

Crystal notes cascade alongside rhythm mountains, gothic-echo vibes

June 20, 2008, inspired by Joe Locke