

Flute champ Holly Hofmann a jazz role model

Nationally acclaimed San Diego musician performs Nov. 26 in La Jolla

By George Varga

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As one of the nation's most gifted and respected jazz flutists, Holly Hofmann could be forgiven for tooting her own horn once in a while (if you'll pardon the mixed musical metaphor).

But this longtime San Diego resident is happy to let her flawless musicianship and deeply felt playing speak for her. And she doesn't need to sing her own praises, since so many others are happy to do so.

"She's just head and shoulders above the rest of the flute players out there, at least the ones I've worked with," said jazz guitar legend Mundell Lowe, whose past collaborators include such icons as Billie Holiday, Miles Davis and Benny Goodman.

Lowe's wife, veteran jazz singer Betty Bennett, is equally effusive, saying: "Man or woman, Holly is the best flute player I've ever heard."

Hofmann and the quintet she co-leads with her husband of 11 years, nationally acclaimed San Diego jazz pianist Mike Wofford, performs Saturday, November 26, in La Jolla. The concert concludes the 2011 Athenaeum Jazz at Neurosciences fall series.

Not coincidentally, she played as part of the Athenaeum's first jazz series in 1989. Hofmann has since made at least 10 encore appearances under the auspices of the Athenaeum, in various musical configurations, at several area venues.

"Holly is a master of her instrument who plays with incredible technical precision, as well as with a great sense of passion and swing," said Daniel Atkinson, the jazz programming coordinator for the Athenaeum.

Saturday's concert is an album pre-release concert to preview "Turn Signal," the Wofford/Hofmann quintet's excellent upcoming release for Capri Records, which has also released five of her 11 solo albums.

The seven-song collection, which concludes with the Hofmann-penned "M-Line," is a gem of musical concision and understatement. Due out in January, the album features rising jazz trumpet star Terrell Stafford and the first-rate San Diego rhythm section of bassist Rob Thorsen and drummer Richard Sellers. All five will perform Saturday.

"Holly is a fabulous musician whose sound is as warm and welcoming as her heart of gold," Stafford said. "She is always there to listen, as well as play, which explains her impeccable musicianship."

That high level of musicianship began in Cleveland.

It was there that Hofmann started playing flute — albeit a plastic one to start with — at the age of five. Her musical partner was her jazz guitarist father, with whom she would improvise on such chestnuts as "Summertime," "Georgia On My Mind" and "Stompin' at the Savoy."

Hofmann started classical flute lessons at seven and went on to earn her bachelor's and master's degrees in classical flute performance. But her first and biggest love is jazz.

"My dad listened to a lot of big bands and I was taken by soloists like (saxophonist) Johnny Hodges and (trumpeter) Dizzy Gillespie, who told me that my approach to the flute sounded like a trumpet player's," said Hofmann, who lives with her husband in a condo overlooking west Mission Valley.

The bebop trumpet king made that comment after hearing Hofmann and Wofford duet at the 1989 San Diego wedding of James and Linda Moody. A solo star in his own right, James Moody — who died here last December after battling cancer — had been Gillespie's longtime saxophonist and flutist.

"If we are talking about artistry and creativity, Holly has both!" Linda Moody said. "...(James) Moody would be so proud of Holly on this new album."

Hofmann earned her way through college in Cleveland and Colorado as a floral

designer. She studied extensively in the mid-1970s with two jazz luminaries, trombonist Slide Hampton and saxophonist/flutist Frank Wess (with whom she would later tour and record).

Alas, then and now, the number of women jazz flutists with a national reputation can too easily be counted on one hand.

"I was totally embraced by jazz artists in Cleveland. So, it was a big shock when I started going to jam sessions in New York and found that no one believed a diminutive woman could play a jazz flute," recalled the five-foot-two Hofmann, who is also a prominent national jazz educator and teaches privately here when she's not on tour.

She has also been, along with the Athenaeum's Atkinson, San Diego's pre-eminent jazz concert presenter for much of the past two decades.

"Today, when young jazz flutists ask me for advice, I tell them it's incredibly difficult," Hofmann continued. "The biggest challenge is the preconceptions most people have of how a jazz flutist will sound. I've been able to change some people's opinions about that, but not everybody's and certainly not the majority."

But there is one opinion which requires no changing. Namely, that of her husband, who earned national attention for his work with Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and many other jazz greats, including such top flutists as Bud Shank, Joe Farrell and Lew Tabackin.

"It will sound partial, no matter how I put it, but Holly stands alone above all those other flutists I played with, in terms of sound quality and getting the best out of the instrument," Wofford said.

"That's because of her classical training and because she only plays the flute and doesn't double on another instrument. She swings the hardest of any flutist I've known. None of them can dig as deep into the music."

Wofford and Hofmann have been jazz collaborators for nearly a quarter century. But her artistic skills have impressed more recent collaborators, such as New York drummer Alvester Garnett, who only began working with her in 2008.

"Holly's musicianship and spirit are simply superb," Garnett said.

"Not only is she supremely soulful in her playing, but — additionally (and crucially) — her rhythm, feel and sense of time is absolutely phenomenal. She's always spot on and clear as a bell... Being on the bandstand with her on a professional, spiritual and friendship level is pure pleasure. With all that rolled up into one, it's clear why folks like Ray Brown hired her!"

Hofmann played as a guest soloist with Brown's trio, off and on, from 1998 until his

death in 2002.

"The one album I bought with my own allowance, at age 10, was a Ray Brown and Oscar Peterson album called 'We Get Requests,' and I played along with the solos by Oscar's right hand. That was the most influential record in my listening experience, so touring with Ray was a lifelong dream come true."

Brown was similarly enthused about Hofmann. Speaking in a 2002 Union-Tribune interview that was conducted less than six months before his passing, he said: "Holly is an extraordinary flutist. She has her own approach and style, and I like that. She says she got a lot of stuff from Frank Wess and a few other people. But somewhere along the way she discarded that stuff and developed her own sound and talent."

Continuing to develop her sound, as accomplished as she already is, remains a key goal for Hofmann. Ditto her quest to help change the perception of the flute in jazz as a lightweight instrument, especially when played by women.

"Having been classically trained in European art music, I went to jazz for a career because I found it so much more interesting to create music on the spot," Hofmann said.

"Jazz is an emotional music and I feel its rhythms in my heart and soul. I know I won't totally see things change in my lifetime, but I want to make a serious contribution to changing the perception of the flute as its seen in jazz. And I'd like to provide encouragement to women in what is still a male-dominated field."

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