

Hofmann takes the flute off the jazz sidelines  
by Andrew Gilbert

A short list of jazz's iconic instruments would include the tenor saxophone, stand-up bass and trumpet. The flute probably ends up tagging along behind the violin, bass clarinet and vibraphone. Holly Hofmann is a leading force in changing that perception. A tough mainstream player who swings with authority, Hofmann brings a tonal heft to the instrument that it too often lacks in jazz settings. While she can interpret ballads with unabashed lyricism, she is just as likely to tear through a blues tune, artfully employing honks and growls. In a scene with a plethora of hard-charging horn players, Hofmann has gained considerable attention through her collaborations with some of jazz's most revered musicians, including trombonist Slide Hampton, guitarist Mundell Lowe and saxophonist James Moody (who is also an accomplished flutist). Her longtime relationship with the late bass legend Ray Brown included stints when he anchored her quartet, and international tours when she was featured in his band, often over the protests of promoters who preferred a more traditional lineup.

"Dizzy once told me he thought I sound more like a trumpeter than any other instrument," said Hofmann from her home in San Diego, referring to bebop patriarch Dizzy Gillespie. "Ray always told me that the reason I was touring with the trio is that I stomped on it. He had a big fight with half the promoters just to bring me. When he said flute, they said, 'Oh, come on!' There's a preconception as to what that's going to sound like. Now, I try to take stomping to the next level, to keep the sense of swing while reaching harmonically."

Hofmann performs tonight as part of the San Ramon Library's jazz concert series with her quartet, featuring Bay Area stalwarts Rob Fisher on bass and Vince Lateano on drums, and Mike Wofford, a brilliant pianist who served as musical director for Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan. His 1992 Concord Jazz album "Mike Wofford at Maybeck" is one of the highlights of that prestigious solo recital series.

Frequent collaborators on the Southern California jazz scene for more than a decade, Wofford and Hofmann recently cemented their relationship off the band stand through marriage.

"The quartet has a pretty varied book," Hofmann said. "We do originals, some Herbie Hancock tunes, John Scofield's 'Groovelation,' and some of Ray's arrangements, like Cole Porter's 'Every thing I Love.' Mike and I are co-writing a lot of things, too."

In many ways, Hofmann's success flies in the face of the flute's perennial position as a sideline instrument in jazz. The vast majority of jazz flutists double on the instrument, focusing most of their time on the saxophone.

While Wayman Carver brought the flute into Chick Webb's popular swing orchestra in the 1930s, it wasn't until the '50s that it gained popularity through the work of Buddy Collette, Bud Shank, Paul Horn and Frank Wess (in the Count Basie Orchestra).

Herbie Mann has built a highly successful career with his Latin jazz flute work, but the instrument has been most thoroughly explored in avant-garde settings, with players such as Eric Dolphy, Price Lasha and Roland Kirk paving the way for James Newton, a brilliant improviser who now spends much of his time teaching and composing.

“One reason it hasn’t caught on is that it’s an incredibly difficult instrument to play ...,” Hofmann said. “There just haven’t been enough players dedicated to bringing it into the main stream.”

Hofmann is leading the charge to rectify that situation, making a convincing case that in the right hands, the flute can hold its own against all the other horns.

-Andrew Gilbert Times Correspondent