

Saxophonist Don Rice's smooth jazz sounds delight Albright-Knox crowd

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The smooth jazz sounds of tenor saxophonist Don Rice would meld perfectly into a dark, smoky, inner-city club on any rainy Saturday night.

Instead, it was a sweltering Sunday afternoon when Rice and the Bobby Jones Trio delighted an ample crowd, most of whom clustered under shade trees near the steps of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Rice was the second performer featured during the five-week Buffalo News Jazz Series.

A Nebraska native who first took the stage professionally at 14, Rice has been a regular performer in Buffalo for the past 25 years. Since he now lives in California, most of his shows are staged on the West Coast. So for his annual trip east, he and the audience engage in mutual Buffalo love.

"I look out and I recognize a lot of faces," Rice said, thanking the crowd before launching into George and Ira Gershwin's upbeat "Strike Up the Band."

Clad in a long-sleeved blue button-down shirt and dark trousers, Rice exudes a calm professionalism. He's played thousands of gigs, and knows how to put an audience and his fellow performers at ease. Rice's notes mix breathy tones with an earthly nostalgia. His song selection often reached deep into the past.

Rice's actions onstage are dictated by the music. During up-tempo songs, he puffed his cheeks and moved in time with the rhythm. For sad ballads, he collapsed into himself, frozen in place while creating wistful sounds.

After "It Had to Be You" and "Just Friends," Rice introduced guest vocalist Mike Costley.

Costley, looking every bit the part of a lounge singer with an open-necked shirt and slicked hair, worked the crowd as he sang "Green Dolphin Street," ad libbing lines about growing up in the area. He kept the mood loose, declaring via song, "I was born in Buffalo/Millard Fillmore before they tore it down."

As the audience applauded, Costley directed the attention back to Rice.

"This guy is a superstar in Palm Springs," he said. "He's a great musician and you're lucky to have him here."

Rice stepped offstage twice to feature the Bobby Jones Trio: Danny Hull on drums, Wayne Moose, featured on several bass solos, and Jones on piano.

As mellow notes progressed, the band played “Emily” and “All of Me.” After an hourlong set, musicians stepped offstage for intermission so Rice could autograph CDs and speak to fans. Clouds thickened to shield the sun, then it was back to the music.

Despite overcast skies that threatened rain, most of the crowd remained in their seats, a testament to the high level of musicianship on display.

Rice has commented that any time he plays, it’s nearly impossible to not be in a good mood. Despite the humidity, the audience gathered on the lawn shared his sentiments.