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## MUSIC

# Living Jazz to embrace ‘expansive’ take on Martin Luther King Jr. concert

Andrew Gilbert | January 11, 2024 Updated: January 13, 2024, 10:49 pm



Jazz musicians from the Oakland area will pay tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. at the “In the Name of Love” concert.

Photo: Courtesy Living Jazz

New leadership at Living Jazz is taking on the tradition of celebrating Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday, applying to the annual concert an intergenerational lens and a fresh, collaborative sound.

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The 20th “In the Name of Love” concert, an East Bay bash that honors King’s legacy, embodies both the organization’s deep Oakland roots and the evolution of its vision under a new executive director.

A jazz education organization founded by Berkeley psychotherapist Stacey Hoffman in 1984, Living Jazz has long played an essential role in the local music ecosystem. Last year, Hoffman passed the torch to Lyz Luke, part of a generational transition on the Bay Area jazz scene that also saw new leadership at the **Monterey Jazz Festival**, **SFJazz** and the **California Jazz Conservatory**.

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Aneesa Strings at Zoo Labs recording studio in Oakland in March 2018. The bassist/vocalist is set to perform at the 20th annual “In the Name of Love” concert on Saturday, Jan. 13.

Photo: Sarahbeth Maney/Special to the Chronicle

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With a program co-presented by SFJazz celebrating the music of Stevie Wonder, the concert, set for Saturday, Jan. 13, isn’t a radical departure for Living Jazz. But it does flow directly from Luke’s experience as the driving force behind UnderCover Presents, which produced a series of near-legendary concerts between 2010 and 2019 reimagining beloved albums track by track by bringing together musicians from many stylistic realms. It’s a vision she’s bringing to Living Jazz, too.

“I want to be very expansive,” Luke said. “It’s a big thing that most jazz organizations are addressing, maintaining the traditional roots while bringing in that next generation. I think

expanding genres will help that.”

For most of the year, Living Jazz tends to work with programs like the summer session Jazz Camp West and the Living Jazz Children’s Project, a free music education program for low-income public elementary schools in the East Bay. With a budget approaching \$2 million, Luke is determined to keep expanding where she sees the need.

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The nonprofit Oaktown Jazz Workshops is set to collaborate with Living Jazz for the 20th annual “In the Name of Love” concert. Photo: Courtesy Living Jazz

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“We’re launching a year of partnerships,” she said. “Not just SFJazz, but Oakland Symphony, Oaktown Jazz Workshops and jam sessions with the Oakland Public Conservatory. I love collaborations. We have to move from a mindset of scarcity to one of abundance.”

Luke learned all about abundance as the co-founder and driving force behind arts collective UnderCover Presents. Rather than revisiting a particular album, Saturday’s program focuses on Wonder’s classic 1970s songs (“Golden Lady,” “Living for the City”) reinterpreted and rearranged via collaborations between artists such as bassist/vocalist **Aneesa Strings**, vocalist and multi-instrumentalist **La Doña**, the Awesöme Orchestra Collective, jazz R&B singer Rhonda Benin, the SFJazz High School All-Stars, saxophonist Howard Wiley and Lines Ballet dancer **Babatunji**.

Bay Area dancer Babatunji at Lake Merritt in Oakland in September.

Photo: Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

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It's by far the most ambitious and high-profile event produced by Living Jazz, the Oakland music education organization that's an essential ingredient in the secret sauce that makes the Bay Area jazz scene such a verdant hothouse for talented young musicians.

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For Luke, who returned to the East Bay to work with Living Jazz just before the pandemic after a year in Colorado, producing "In the Name of Love" is both unfinished UnderCover business and an assertion of Oakland pride.

"There's so much bad press about Oakland these days, and a lot has been stripped away from the city," she told the Chronicle in a recent interview at Living Jazz's office upstairs from the Piedmont

Piano Co. showroom in Oakland's Uptown neighborhood. "In a time of division and isolation, this is about unity and coming together in a joyful, loving way," the arts leader said. "And it's a chance to do the Stevie Wonder concert we didn't get a chance to do with UnderCover Presents."

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Singer Rhonda Benin is one of many artists slated to perform at the "In the Name of Love" concert.

Photo: Courtesy Living Jazz

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Luke had planned to produce an UnderCover tribute to Wonder's "Songs in the Key of Life" for the organization's 10th anniversary in 2020. Between the pandemic and a new full-time position with Living Jazz, she had to give up the dream, until the annual MLK celebration gave her the opportunity to revive the plan.

Returning to Wonder's discography for "In the Name of Love" made perfect sense. The award-winning singer recorded his hit "Happy Birthday" to champion the King family's efforts to establish the martyred civil rights leader's birthday as a federal holiday, a campaign that succeeded in 1986.

With pianist, producer and composer Kev Choice serving as music director, and actress, athlete and recording artist RyanNicole as host, the program offers many tantalizing collaborations.

"Rap Notes" (2000) is performed by the San Francisco Symphony with hip-hop artist Kev Choice, left, freestyle artist Anthony Venezia, soprano Hila Plitmann (not pictured) and conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen during the Opening Night Gala concert at Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco on Sept. 22.

Photo: Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

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“Kev is connected with so many different musicians and scenes,” said Julianna Cressman, Living Jazz’s marketing and development manager. “He’s the unofficial mayor of Oakland. While we were doing an outdoor photo shoot a few days ago, at least five people came over to dap him up.”

Choice and Luke also have longstanding ties. He performed at UnderCover Presents’ 2017 tribute to “**The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill**” and 2019’s tribute to A Tribe Called Quest’s “**Midnight Marauders**.” Luke connected Choice with the late **Oakland Symphony conductor Michael Morgan**, which led to the pianist premiering his Symphony commission “Soul Restoration Suite” under the maestro’s baton in 2017.

At the Paramount, he particularly wants to highlight some of the region’s rising stars. Though now living in Los Angeles, Strings grew up in Oakland and has known Choice for years, so he thought it would be “great to do something with her at home showing how she’s grown tremendously as an artist.”

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“And I’ve been seeing La Doña rise,” he added of the San Francisco femmeton pioneer. “These are incredible artists I see in the community – not just artists but working in education and social justice, which makes them perfect for a concert honoring MLK.”

*Andrew Gilbert is a freelance writer.*



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Andrew Gilbert

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