

Disciple of sax

Aaron Watson and band bring spirit to Havana Reggae Festival

Amanda Sieradzki Council on Culture & Arts

Musician Aaron Watson was transfixed by the saxophone in the Florida Governor's Mansion. A fifth grader at the time, he had been invited to a ball at the mansion to celebrate winning an essay contest and receiving a scholarship. He was honored to be invited, but what he remembers the most from that night was the jazz combo that performed during dinner.

"I sat there and listened to the saxophonist playing while the governor was calling up everyone who received awards," remembers Watson. "My dad came over to tell me to go up. I told him, 'I want to play that,' and pointed at the saxophone."

That summer his parents bought him his very own saxophone. Watson attended Raa Middle School the following year and joined the school band. He went on to earn a degree in music from Florida A&M University.

If you go

What: Havana Reggae Fest

When: 4-9 p.m. on Saturday, May 8

Where: 5F Farm Event Center, 8583 Salem Road, Quincy, FL

Cost: General admission \$20, VIP \$40

Contact: For more information, call 850-743-9497 or visit <https://havanareggafest.com>

Watson grew up listening to the Marching 100 and had been exposed to many instruments, but it wasn't until he heard the sax by itself that he was sure of the direction he wanted to take as a musician.

Watson is part of local band, The Disciples of Music, which will play at the Havana Reggae Fest on Saturday, May 8.

The group is comprised of multi-instrumentalist Kirk Gavin, guitarist and vocalist Israel Campbell, bassist Kendrick Jacobs and drummer Jordan Green. Many of the band members have known each other since high school and college, and Watson says that connection is vital when it comes to playing together.

"Naturally, when it comes to doing a show, we already have a tight bond and chemistry," says Watson. "While preparing for the show, we talk about things that we need to be reminded of and the reason why the show is important. We sit, think, meditate and pray to ask God to deliver whatever message we should deliver to the audience."

Playing music is a spiritual practice for Watson. He takes inspiration from jazz figureheads like Charlie "Bird" Parker and Cannonball Adderley.

He admires both musicians for their ability to improvise on the spot, especially the speed that Parker commands from his instrument. Watson recalls listening to one album where Adderley never repeats a lick of music and being in awe of his imagination and technical skill.

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Disciples of Music will be playing at the Havana Reggae Fest after its cancellation last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. SPECIAL TO THE TALLAHASSEE DEMOCRAT

Disciples

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When Watson plays his saxophone, he looks inside his heart. While he acknowledges that transcribing, or emulating, the licks he hears from past musicians is important in his process, he is more focused on playing from a place of authentic feeling. He remembers people he has lost — the face of his best friend at age thirteen and his grandfather, a fellow saxophonist, who passed on while he was in high school.

"A lot of my ancestors come down to me as I'm playing and it produces a whole different sound," says Watson. "They listen to me practice, they know what I'm thinking when I'm coming up with new music. They come down and send the message and I deliver it. I let these spirits guide me, and whatever they send to me, I send to my audience to get into their spirits, minds and hearts."

The band's name is linked in part to this spirituality, and to fate. At their first gig, Watson says they were first dubbed "The Four Disciples" by the late Phoenix Uprising keyboardist, Shango. That name stuck for a while as they continued to find their own sound beyond just reggae or jazz music. When they got onstage to play at their next venue, the emcee introduced them as "The Disciples of Music."

"We looked at each other, and from that point on we adapted to that name," says Watson.

He felt the name was a better fit given how the band continued branching out into new styles. Watson sees

strong connections between the reggae and jazz genres, and has extensively studied the improvisation, melodies, and reoccurring themes in both.

This will be the group's first time playing at the Havana Reggae Fest after its cancellation last year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Watson is excited that the band will be the first onstage. They will share two songs that have had a deep impact on the members. The first, "This Life," was written by Minsa, a member of the band Phoenix Rising, and talks about the pursuit of freedom.

"It's a song that says we don't want to be controlled, we don't want to live under bondage, we want to be free and live our own life," says Watson. "We want to walk among the earth and not worry about what a lot of other humans have to worry about, and what some humans don't have to worry about it. Every man deserves a chance to live his own life."

The second song, "Mind Over Matter," written by their late friend and keyboardist, shares a similar uplifting message as it assures the listener to stay calm in the face of struggle. Watson is hopeful that these words will find their way to the people in the audience who need to hear it the most.

"Whenever I'm having a hard time, music can truly bring me back to earth," says Watson. "Right now is a terrible time for a lot of people, and the only thing I can hope for with this music is that it gives people a spirit of hope that things are going to get better."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).