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Jazz Magic

Carrying on the Tradition

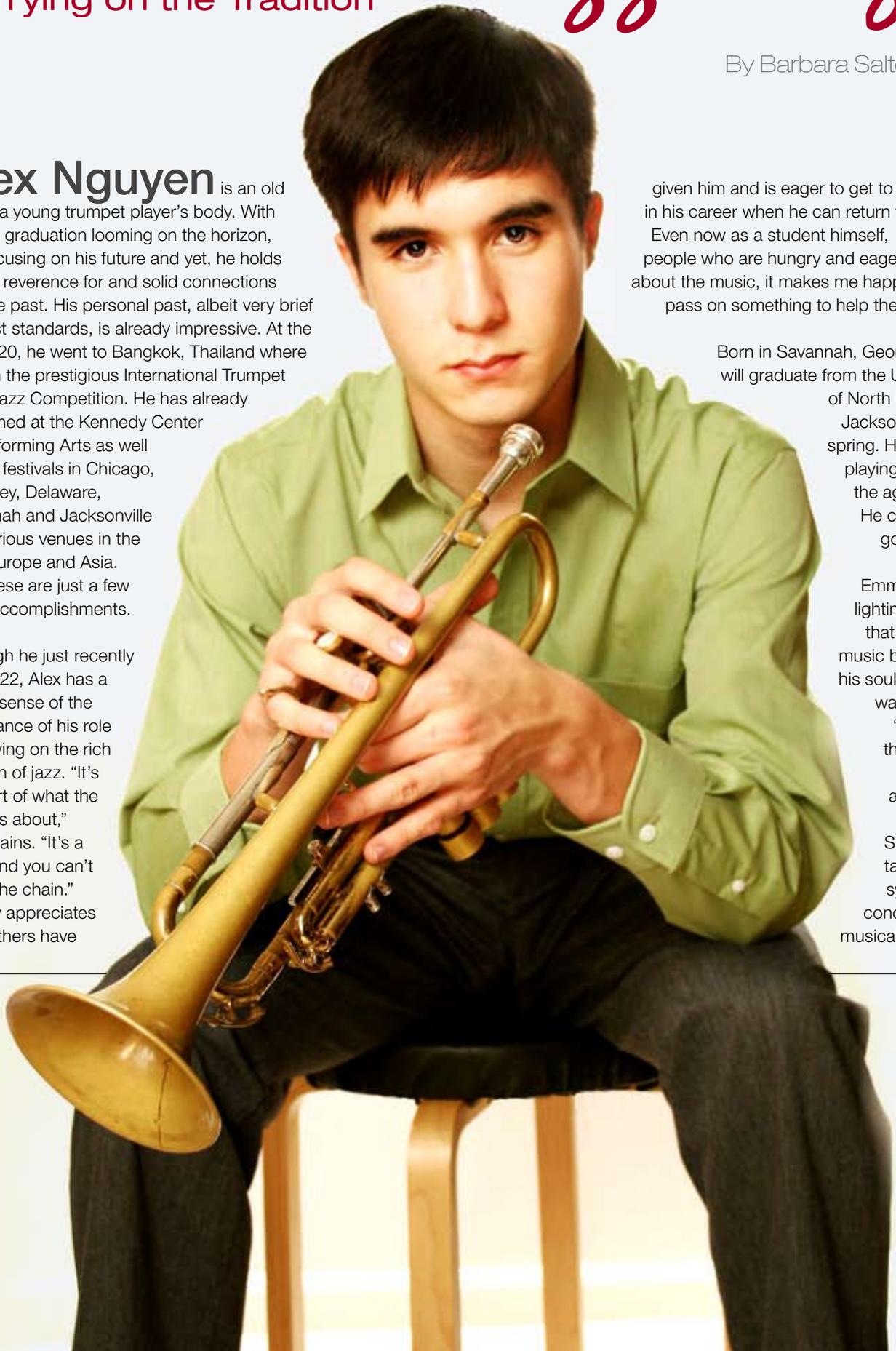
By Barbara Salter Nelson

Alex Nguyen is an old soul in a young trumpet player's body. With college graduation looming on the horizon, he's focusing on his future and yet, he holds a deep reverence for and solid connections with the past. His personal past, albeit very brief by most standards, is already impressive. At the age of 20, he went to Bangkok, Thailand where he won the prestigious International Trumpet Guild Jazz Competition. He has already performed at the Kennedy Center for Performing Arts as well as jazz festivals in Chicago, Monterey, Delaware, Savannah and Jacksonville and various venues in the U.S., Europe and Asia. And these are just a few of his accomplishments.

Although he just recently turned 22, Alex has a strong sense of the importance of his role in carrying on the rich tradition of jazz. "It's just part of what the music is about," he explains. "It's a cycle and you can't break the chain." He fully appreciates what others have

given him and is eager to get to the point in his career when he can return the favor. Even now as a student himself, "if I meet people who are hungry and eager to learn about the music, it makes me happy if I can pass on something to help them grow."

Born in Savannah, Georgia, Alex will graduate from the University of North Florida in Jacksonville this spring. He started playing piano at the age of five. He credits his godmother Frances Emmons with lighting the fire that has kept music burning in his soul since he was a child. "She was the church organist and piano teacher. She would take me to symphony concerts and musicals—every





opportunity she could find so I could experience all kinds of music." When he was ten years old he started playing the trumpet. "My sister played the oboe in the band and that was pretty cool. I wanted to be in the band, too. Someone told me that I looked like a trumpet player," he laughs, "so I just went with that. When I gig, it's mostly trumpet and flugelhorn."

He was fortunate enough to attend high school at the Savannah Arts Academy. "They are known for their jazz program and had a lot of guest artists. That was my first introduction to jazz and I immediately felt totally connected in some way." He was so enthusiastic about learning more about the music that his band director suggested Alex take private lessons with jazz trombonist Teddy Adams. "He's kind of like the 'man' in Savannah for jazz. I started going to his house for lessons every week and he was awesome. He was so giving of his time. He didn't charge me very much and we would get together and that one-hour lesson would turn into three hours. My dad would be waiting outside for all that time," he grins. "Part of that really struck a note with me. I immediately recognized the tradition of the music and how it's passed on."

"Jazz lovers are really dedicated to the music and many support young people with opportunities to learn. That really spoke to me. It's more than just an individual thing. It's like the music itself. You've got the improvisation—there's so much freedom and individuality—I think that's beautiful. But at the same time, there's

also a sense of give and take on the bandstand. I think sharing it is what jazz is all about. You can play by yourself—which is great—but when you're playing together and contributing ideas... it's magic!"

Teddy Adams remains one of the mentors in Alex's life. "He's been supportive of me since the beginning. In fact, I just played with him at the Black Heritage Festival in Savannah. At one point, he was like, 'Don't worry about paying for your lessons.' It wasn't about that. It was the mutual love for the music and the thing about the tradition being passed on," Alex says. Through Teddy, he had the opportunity to sit in on sessions and play with other like-minded musicians, like jazz keyboardist Doug Carn, who Alex also considers a mentor of his. "He's a big guy. The first time I met him I was actually kind of scared. He's a pretty intimidating cat for a 14 or 15 year old kid just learning about the music," he smiles as he remembers first meeting Doug. "That was my first intro to Doug. I've known him since then and we've done some clubs together."

Doug was also the one who introduced Alex to the North East Florida Jazz Association. Since its inception, the NEFJA has been dedicated to perpetuating jazz by presenting live jazz at a reasonable cost—and by providing scholarships to talented Florida music students. Alex is one of 25 young musicians who have received scholarships from the NEFEA. "Jazz," says Muriel McCoy, President of the NEFJA, "is America's unique art form." She and her late husband Eugene "Jeep" McCoy were the driving forces behind establishing the NEFJA more than 20 years ago. "We wanted to be able to attend live jazz sessions here in our own area—but more importantly, we were committed to doing what we could to make certain the art form was passed on to future generations. Supporting talented young people through the scholarships helps ensure that."

While Alex is very grateful for the support he's received from the NEFJA and others, he is still concerned about the future of jazz. "The arts are often the first to go when school budgets get cut. People just don't see it as important. If I hadn't had the opportunity to attend the Savannah Arts Academy, I don't think I'd be playing jazz at all. These are different times. It's not part of the mainstream culture like it was in Doug or Teddy's time and in the years before that. Today, it's hard for kids to learn about jazz unless their parents are musicians. If they're not exposed to it in school, how would they know about the music?"

That may be true for the most part, but here in Flagler County, music education is still a priority according to Flagler Schools Superintendent Bill Delbrugge. Like Alex, he plays the trumpet. And, at one point in his career, he served as a Band Director in Chattanooga, Tennessee: "In Flagler County, we want to expand our arts programs not cut them. In addition to our regular performing arts offerings during school hours, the Flagler County School District fully funds the Flagler Youth Orchestra in which students from all 11 district schools participate," Bill states. "We have budget issues we're dealing with now, especially with the

loss of students that every district in the state is experiencing, and we had to make a choice, too. Do you let the orchestra go because it's something that could be very easily cut out of the budget? We felt that because of all of the good things that the fine arts brings to the community, it far outweighs the cost."

Additionally, Flagler County Schools worked directly with the NEFJA to find a venue suitable for the upcoming 2nd Annual NEFJA Jazz Festival. This year the Jazz Festival will be held at Mantanzas High School in Palm Coast on March 23 – 25. In keeping with the tradition of educating young people about jazz, Doug and some of the other festival performers, including Palm Coast resident and popular jazz musician Robert Whiting, will conduct a Jazz Appreciation workshop for students at Mantanzas High prior to the Festival. Additionally, the Mantanzas High School Steel Band will perform at the Jazz Fest on Saturday.

"Any time our students can be exposed to professional musicians, we definitely want them to do that. If you hear other quality musicians, then you can start emulating their sound. That's an important part of becoming a professional musician," Bill explains. "That's why we want our kids to be able to have the experience of hearing them. It makes them better musicians."

Bill is looking forward to attending the Jazz Festival. Alex, Teddy, Doug and a host of other jazz notables will be performing during the three-day event. The headliner will be internationally acclaimed

recording artist Dave Valentin, who combines the influences of pop, R&B and Brazilian music with Latin jazz to create an accessible form of crossover jazz. Dave, too, carries on the tradition of passing on the music. Through active participation in a New York City Schools program called "Change through Music" and as a teacher, he has worked with inner city kids, including gang members, influencing many children to continue their educations.

Alex will be performing on Saturday March 24 co-leading a Quartet with Von Barlow on the drums, Josh Bowlus on the piano, Paul Sikivie on the bass. "Von's the veteran of the group and an incredibly creative drummer. He takes chances and he pushes us to take chances too. The reason Doug asked this group to play the Palm Coast Jazz Fest is that he heard us do a gig in St. Augustine. We played for an hour and Doug was blown away. He was like, 'that part there—did you guys arrange that?' That was the first time the four of us had played together and everything was spontaneous! That kind of magic will happen when you play with Von, so it should really be exciting."

Von, whose resume reads like a veritable who's who of jazz musicians and venues, thinks so, too. On his website, Von describes the upcoming performance. "This guy (Alex) is one of the most fired up trumpet players around. It's going to be a kick-ass set." A seasoned jazz musician gigging with three young up-and-coming stars. The tradition continues. Don't miss out on the magic. ©

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