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MUSIC

All That Yaz And More Underground Brooklyn Sax Player Makes His Mark



A regular performer in subway stations, Yaz Band and its saxophone player Yasuyuki "Yaz" Takagi (left) will play a mix of jazz, blues and R&B at an aboveground gig on September 29

By Michèle De Meglio

There's no need to visit Carnegie Hall — one of the city's brightest saxophonists is entertaining crowds underground. Greenpoint resident Yasuyuki "Yaz" Takagi and his band, appropriately titled Yaz Band, regularly play its blend of jazz, blues and R&B in the city's most populated subway stations. "Our band has lots of energy. We love to perform," Takagi, 42, said.

Takagi has always wanted to entertain.

As a young boy growing up in Osaka, Japan, he listened to his country's traditional music, as well as his father's contemporary jazz records.

"My father had a lot of jazz recordings. So, probably, I listened to his records," he said.

Intrigued by the modern songs, Takagi fed his musical cravings by listening to the hits of American musicians, including R&B group Earth, Wind and Fire, saxophone player Grover Washington Jr., jazz pianist Bob James, funk band the Crusaders, and jazz composer and pianist Dave Grusin.

However, it was the smooth jazz of saxophone player David Sanborn that inspired Takagi to study the instrument.

After earning a bachelor's degree in education at a Japanese university, Takagi split his time by working as a social worker and studying the saxophone with some of the country's top musicians.

Takagi's love of all things jazz brought him to New York.

In 1992, Takagi left his home in Japan and journeyed to the United States in hopes of becoming a professional musician.

"I had a desire to play music and I made a decision to come here," he said.

Takagi traveled to New York with another aspiring musician. "He had the same idea so I came here with my friend," he said.

While his pal returned to Japan after just six months, Takagi decided to give the Big Apple a shot.

His dedication paid off.

Takagi has become a subway celebrity since forming the Yaz Band with keyboardist Eric Smith, bassists Sly Gerald and Iyasu Nagata, guitarists Takeshi Hiwatari and Eiji Obata, and drummers Dave Dawson, Shinya Miyamoto and Tomoaki Kanno.

The band is a staple at highly-trafficked subway stations, such as Grand Central, Penn Station and the 34th Street Herald Square stop.

They have even been a part of the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority's "Music Under New York" concert series, in which their shows were promoted by the city.

So popular with mass transit commuters, the musicians were finalists in a local news station's search for New York City's "Subway Idol," which was a play on the popular television show "American Idol."

The Yaz Band was singled out for this honor by the city's subway riders, who enjoy listening to the musicians' soothing sounds while waiting for their trains.

"The music that my band plays is a mixture of R&B, blues and jazz songs. There are so many musical styles that I have a lot of interest in. I really like standard jazz but I like other genres of music, as well," Takagi said.

The Yaz Band regularly performs a mix of original songs and jazz staples, including funky tunes by one of Takagi's favorite groups, Earth, Wind and Fire.

"I like old songs. I really love R&B," Takagi said. "That was my dream — to blend original songs with old songs."

As the Yaz Band becomes better known, Takagi hopes to perform at more venues in Brooklyn.

"I performed at a festival in Greenpoint. That was great," he said. "I hope I'll play more clubs. There are a lot of clubs in Williamsburg. I'd like to do that."

On September 29th at 10 p.m., the Yaz Band will perform at the Baggot Inn, 82 West Third Street in Manhattan. Tickets are \$7 and proceeds will go to Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.

Contact the Inn at 212-477-0622 or log onto www.baggotinn.com to learn more.

For more information about the Yaz Band or to purchase the band's new album, "You Can't Say It In Public," log onto www.yazband.com or www.cdbaby.com.