ARTS

"Feel the rain on your skin / No one else can feel it for you"
UNWRITTEN NATASHA BEDINGFIELD

Artists blend original jazz and spoken-word poetry at New Haven Museum

BY REGINA JONES
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Jazz Haven, a local organization that promotes jazz music, visited the New Haven Museum on Saturday for a night of original poetry — to the background of some jazz.

The program featured artists such as Jesse Hameen II, a board member of Jazz Haven, on the drums; Zwelakhe-Duma Bell le Pere, a member of multiple Grammy Award-winning ensembles, on bass; Darren Litzie, an adjunct professor of music at Sacred Heart University, on piano; Will Cleary, a National Endowment for the Arts composer, on saxophone and various spoken word poets.

"There's such a rich music history here in New Haven," Cynthia Riccio, the director of programs and planning at the New Haven Museum, said. "Jesse approached us about doing this event here, and it seemed like a perfect fit."

Under the chandelier of the museum's second-floor auditorium, the musicians improvised throughout the entire program while poets performed their original pieces during music breaks. The musicians did not even rehearse or hold a sound check, Hameen said.

During the show, Hameen remarked that he was hopeful about the future of music and how the performance still included the core principles of jazz — improvisation, the blues and swing.

"I feel so good knowing that the music is in good hands," Hameen said.

The performance also highlighted the personal convictions of some artists.

Craig O'Connell, the president of Jazz Haven and one of the spoken-word artists, shared that during his time as an elementary school teacher, he developed a curriculum on how to incorporate jazz into one's daily life.

One of the tasks he assigned his students was to recite spoken word poetry by greats such as Langston Hughes, he said. O'Connell shared a poem, inspired by Miles Davis, written for his students.

As jazz rang through the halls of the building, so did the claps, laughs and voices of the audience.

"What I love about this particular space, this ballroom, is that music sounds so beautiful in here and it travels all the way through the museum," Riccio said.

At one point during the show, Stanley Welch, a poet, invited the room to participate in the show by reciting a chant alongside him. The room enthusiastically joined him.

"Music brings people together, and there's healing in music. My two big loves are music and poetry, so this is perfect," Kate Rushin, a spoken word poet who performed on Saturday, said. "Just look at the wide range of people here. It brings people from all over."

Jazz Haven was founded in 1996.

Brett Penk contributed reporting.

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REGINA JONES / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Jazz Haven brought together award-winning musicians and artists at the New Haven Museum on Saturday.

First exhibition on Nguni diaspora opens at Yale University Art Gallery

BY KARISSA CHENG
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

The Yale University Art Gallery on Thursday celebrated the opening of "Nguni: Migrant Nations of Southeast Africa," a pioneering exhibition focused on the art of the Southern Africa-based Nguni diaspora.

The exhibition, which the gallery describes on its website as the first exhibition on the diaspora's early-19th century works, features artifacts from that century, as well as specially commissioned photographs and graphic designs. The opening ceremony featured remarks from James Green, chief curator of the exhibition, and a performance by the Yale Gospel Choir.

"I think there's been a big problem with the study of African art, that it's presented as being traditional, presented as being from outside of history, ahistorical," Green said. "So I think this is a moment of just situating it in the present, and also creating something new."

The exhibition was created with no intended path in mind for visitors; rather, they should begin with the part they are most drawn to, Green said.

While the gospel choir performed their second song, they guided attendees from the YUAG lobby to the exhibition rooms on the fourth-floor mezzanine.

"The idea is not so much that there's a linear narrative, from Victorian train station to Victorian train station down a train track. That's not the idea," Green said. "It's more that you can dip in, dip out, see an object, see a photograph, and whether you like it or not, you are going to learn something about Nguni culture."

Nomawonga Khumalo, director of the film "isilulu," and Nandipa Sipengane, the isiZulu language lector at Yale, also made remarks on Thursday.

"In the spirit of this gathering, we too have become a part of a community," Sipengane said of the choir during her remarks. "We're sharing culture, storytelling, and the knowledge and the experiences that are going to be represented in this space, in this exhibition tonight."

According to Green, the exhibition displays many works from natural history museums that were never on view for the public. The objects were illuminated in a way that emulated a jewelry show to better showcase the intricacies of the objects.

Attendees spanned from students and professors to New Haven community members, curators and appraisers.

Cara Borelli, an assistant professor at the Yale School of Medicine, said she attended the event with her sisters while they were in town to learn about the textiles and beadwork displayed in the exhibition.

"I was not expecting the music," she said. "The music was beautiful. Like the harmonies, the drum beats. It was really such an extraordinary talent."

According to Kailen Rogers, the associate director of exhibitions at the Peabody Museum who attended the event, the Peabody is also planning to launch a complementary exhibition to "Nguni" later this year.

The day after the opening, the gallery held a screening of Khumalo's film "isilulu," which explores the oral history that contextualizes the exhibition's objects.

Khumalo said it's a priority to preserve the original voices of the communities explored.

The exhibition will stay on view at the YUAG until June 20, 2027.

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The Yale University Art Gallery celebrated the opening of "Nguni: Migrant Nations of Southeast Africa" on Thursday.