

See top-notch performances for modest prices

The Paramount Theatre kicks off its 2011 Local Roots Concert Series with an evening of jazz by sultry singer Charmin Michelle and saxophonist Kim Gast and The Jazz Imports.

The music begins at 7:30 p.m. Saturday.

"Charmin Michelle is this wonderful, sexy, sultry jazz singer, and Kim Gast is one of the most terrific saxophonists to walk the planet," Laurie Johnson said. "This is a band that belongs on the stage at the Dakota."

Johnson is the Paramount's director of performing arts. She created the Local Roots Concert series two years ago to showcase local talent.

"I'm thrilled and very, very proud of the Local Roots series," Johnson said. "I carry the torch for the local performers. I work just as hard to get the average Joe on the stage as I work to get

The Jayhawks up on the stage."

Johnson said she spotted Charmin Michelle and The Jazz Imports when they were playing at The White Horse about a year ago and couldn't wait to get them on the Paramount stage. She hopes the larger venue and low ticket prices will introduce the band to a whole new audience.

Local talent

St. Cloud musician Kim Gast is the local connection for the first concert of the Local Roots series. A talented saxophonist, he's played with a number of Twin Cities' bands including Cedar Avenue Big Band, Solid Senders, Stud Brothers, Steve Vecchi Big Band and Wolverines Jazz Orchestra.

Gast also is a music professor at St. Cloud State University where he teaches jazz studies. He said he formed The Jazz Imports about 15 years ago in an effort to bring live jazz to the St. Cloud music scene.

Joining Gast in The Jazz Imports quartet are three Twin Cities musicians: Mark Asche on piano, Bruce Heine on bass and Dave Schmalenberger on drums.

The Jazz Imports' focus is modern jazz, which includes music from the 1940s Be-Bop period through contemporary jazz music.

"Everything we're doing is very accessible," Gast said.

"There'll be plenty of standards that people are familiar with like 'Love for Sale.'"

Gast revels in the spontaneous nature of jazz. He said each show is a unique experience as the band never plays a song the same way twice. "I love jazz. I love the improvisatory aspect of performing. I find it refreshing and creative," Gast said. "It doesn't matter how many times you play a tune, it's new and different every time you play."

Charmin Michelle

Whenever a Jazz Imports performance requires a singer, Charmin Michelle joins the band. Gast said he met Michelle years ago when they were both performing with the Solid Send-

ers. They've been performing together ever since.

"She sings like a bird," Gast said. "Charmin never overstates anything. Her articulation and enunciation is unparalleled and her delivery is right on ... She's just an A number one performer."

Michelle is a formidable performer in her own right. Born in Birmingham, Ala., she moved to the Twin Cities as a child and still calls it home.

She was classically trained in piano, violin and flute but had never dreamed of a singing career. Then one day a chance encounter changed everything.

"I was an adult singing 'Happy Birthday' at a party when someone noticed my voice," Charmin Michelle

Singer Charmin Michelle kicks off Paramount Theatre's 2011 Local Roots Concert Series
PHOTO COURTESY OF CHARMIN MICHELLE



said. "They asked me to sing background vocals for Jesse Johnson's Revue."

That was in 1985. Michelle has been working non-stop ever since, accumulating more than 30 years of concert tours in the Midwest and Europe and releasing four CDs along the way.

Michelle puts her heart and soul into her music. Her smooth contralto voice has been described as sultry, seductive and sublime. She describes her singing style as almost conversational.

"I don't do a lot of vocal gymnastics," Michelle said. "I'm a storyteller. I like to tell a story with a song. A lot of time people have sung the chorus of a song and don't know the rest of the words."

Recently Michelle played Billie Holiday at Pioneer Place on Fifth in St. Cloud. She's also paid musical tribute to the legendary Ella Fitzgerald's early work in a tour of Spain.

Though Michelle tips her hat to the legendary women of jazz, she brings her own unique style to each performance. To keep jazz standards fresh, she researches the music, looking for the meaning behind the words and the way the chord progressions support the lyrics.

"I used to just pick songs because I liked them. Now it's different," Michelle said. "I think more about how the song was written, the meaning of it ... I listen to a variety of singers and versions of a song and think about how I would do it."

Local Roots series highlight area talent

By Jane Laskey, Special to the Times

The Local Roots Concert Series is the brainchild of Laurie Johnson, Paramount Theatre's director of performing arts. While Johnson was proud of the headline acts the Paramount brings to St. Cloud, she wanted to increase local programming.

"The bricks and mortar of this building serve many purposes," Johnson said. "Even though we are fortunate enough to have Joan Baez and the Oak Ridge Boys and all these global icons walking on our stage, when all is said and done the Paramount Theatre is still Central Minnesota's regional arts center. It's the home of our community

theater, the St. Cloud Singing Saints, the Ring of Kerry and other local groups and performers. They walk in the door and they feel like they're at home."

Johnson felt there were many gifted performers in the community who simply didn't have the resources to play the Paramount.

"There's so much cool stuff going on here that either doesn't have the money to play on the Paramount stage or couldn't draw a crowd to fill the space at regular ticket prices," Laurie Johnson said. "That's so wrong. It's a community arts center and community performers should be able to get

onto the stage."

So Johnson decided to try something new. She staged two "Local Roots" concerts in the winter of 2009-2010. The concept was simple. The Paramount kept ticket prices and costs low to help bring new talent in the door.

"We paid every musician who showed up on the stage a nominal fee, put their name on the marquee and make the tickets dirt cheap," Johnson said. "They loved it."

The concerts were such a hit that the series is now a standard part of the Paramount programming, with eight or nine performances scheduled each year. To be eligible for the series,

musical groups must have at least one performer who lives in or grew up in the area.

Johnson handpicks the Local Roots acts, trying to showcase a wide range of musical styles each season. The current series includes jazz, bluegrass, traditional German and classical music.

The low ticket prices and wide variety of musical styles in the series brought new audiences to the Paramount. According to Johnson, the audience for many of the Local Roots groups is high school students and college kids who might not otherwise be able to afford a Paramount concert.