

Jazz pianist finds many paths for musical harmony

By Geralda Miller, Reno Gazette-Journal

Bill Hecht is an architect of sound.

He's a jazz pianist who entertained audiences for years with the Harrah's Reno house band and now plays with the Reno Jazz Orchestra.

He's the composer of slot machine music.

For 10 years, he sang baritone with the Reno Philharmonic Chorus. Now, he plays piano and sings with his church choir. During the Christmas holidays, he strolled with the Great Basin Carolers at Squaw Valley USA and Northstar California.

"It's been about music for a long time now," the 58-year-old said.

Hecht has improvised in life as easily as he manipulates the chords in a Duke Ellington or Count Basie piece.

"After the melody is stated, you do an improvisation that respects the chords that fit with the melody," he said. "That's the only real boundary."

Hecht's mother sat him down at the piano at age 6, and he was on his way to mastery.

"She got me the greatest teachers in the Bay Area," he said. "My classical teacher was trained at Julliard. He had a great feel for working with kids."

At 14, he switched from classical to jazz. Although formal instruction was important, he got the real taste of jazz when his mother took him to the hot clubs to see many of the

greats. He remembers seeing Dave Brubeck, Errol Garner, Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock.

“I think it was the Both/And club where she took me to see Miles Davis, not realizing I wouldn’t be able to get into that club being a minor,” he said. “But Tony Williams, the drummer, was also a minor, so she got me in. I’m a big Herbie fan. When I saw him with Miles, I was hooked.”

With a father who was a physicist and a mother who was a psychologist, Hecht said he attempted classes at the University of California, Berkley but eventually dropped out to tour the country with a band.

In the mid-1970s, the band had a gig on the north shore of Lake Tahoe, and Hecht said he fell in love with the area’s beauty.

“I ended up in Lake Tahoe because, of all the places that we went, that was the most beautiful,” he said. “At the time I thought, ‘Well, I’ll never live in Reno.’”

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