

Yuma Jazz Company marks 15 years with summer series

BY RACHEL TWOGUNS
@RTWOGUNS

It has been 15 years since the Yuma Jazz Company first began performing in the now-defunct Ramada Inn on 32nd Street.

According to Steven Hennig, who formed YJC, the group's milestone year will also be the first year in which live jazz will be available in Yuma almost every week throughout the hotter months.

"It went from searching for a place to play, to now being able to offer performance opportunities to local student musicians and professionals, as well as nationally known artists from Los Angeles, San Diego, and across Arizona," said Hennig.

The company will hold the summer series at two local eateries — Lutes Casino and Julieanna's Patio Café. Between the two series, Hennig said that live jazz will be available almost every Friday, from the end of May through September.

"Remarkable for Yuma, which is typically thought of as shutting down to some extent during the summer months," Hennig remarked.

Both eateries will alternate hosting the jazz performances each Friday.

The group's first summer performance will include vocalist Jennifer Wayman and kicks off today at Lutes Casino. Each performance is from 7 to 9 p.m., with no cover charge at either series.

The Yuma Jazz Company got its start after Hennig first brought together a group of Yuma jazz musicians for a limited engagement at St. Paul's Cultural Center.

Hennig said he rented performance space in the Ramada Inn on 32nd Street, which is no longer in operation, and sold tickets to make up the cost, eventually coming close to breaking even.

Now, along with performing frequently throughout the year at festivals, private functions, public concerts, restaurants and a jazz series, the quintet has recorded four original albums that have received positive reviews from *All About Jazz*, *AZJazz Magazine*, *Jazz Review* and *Jazz Now*.

Throughout most of its existence, the group's members have remained consistent, Hennig noted.

Hennig plays trumpet and flugelhorn. Member Brian Carlson is a "blues-oriented



LOANED PHOTOS

THE YUMA JAZZ COMPANY PERFORMS AT LUTES CASINO. Jon Knudtson (top right) shows off his skills at Julieanna's Patio Café. YJC members Brian Carlson (left in photo bottom right) and Steven Hennig entertain the crowd.

sax player, playing both alto and tenor with equal acumen," Hennig said.

The quintet also consists of guitarist Carl Posh, multi-instrumentalist Jon Knudtson on bass and percussionist Brandon Coz.

The series summer lineup includes the Yuma Jazz Company Quintet group, musical duo Jason & Elle, the YJC Trio, vocalist Jennifer Wayman, trumpeter Bryan Stewart, trombonist Ernie Ortega and singer/pianist Jimmy Caves.

Carlson, who has been a member of the quintet since its founding, said the local jazz scene was almost nonexistent before the group began performing in Yuma.

"At the beginning it was an experience trying to bring something to Yuma that hasn't been here," Carlson said. "It's a whole different culture and a whole different style."

Carlson recalled the time when the group

first formed, and said the crowd was as "big as the band," with only a handful of listeners. Now, the Yuma Jazz Company's winter village jazz series attracts hundreds of attendees each season.

Starting out listening to his parent's jazz albums, Carlson said he has played the saxophone for over 40 years, with 15 of those years dedicated to the Company.

He has taught music in schools and now performs with one of his former middle school students — the group's percussionist, Coz.

Carlson described jazz as a form of music that has its own language because it is often improvised and flows with the mood of the crowd, making for engaging performances. The musicians also work off one another, he said, creating "conversations with their instruments."

Generally thought of as a more urban



genre of music, jazz is something that Carlson said he enjoys spreading throughout a rural community.

"Sometimes you catch people and they will go 'I like this.' They listen to something they wouldn't have listened to before, and that's always a nice thing."

The sax player said the members have been sharing ideas within the group to keep the music fresh and engaging.

"There is a fine line between it being a job and it being fun," Carlson said. "I think the reasons I am still doing it and a lot of the guys are still doing it is the love and the passion, which are what make the job worthwhile. You do your job better when you love to do it. I live music, and that is what I do."

For a schedule of the YJC summer performances and for more information, visit www.yumajazz.com or call (928) 345-1534.