

The Fremont Jackson Phenomenon

– Brent Laidler: the musical evolution

Fremont was meant to be a “one gig” band....

The whole concept was simply to provide a house band for the first annual Uptown Jazz and Blues Festival. Charlie Hoovler and the other organizers asked me to put something together, so I made some calls... We just made up a name for fun. We set up a side stage to keep music going while the main stage changed bands. The first set had blues, R&B and swing. Later we did a set of straight ahead jazz and bebop with the same crew.

The audience really loved it.

Fremont was invited back...

They called me as a feature artist the next year and we decided to keep the 'Fremont' name for continuity sake. I made the routine calls, and discovered the best available bassist played upright. So we completely changed the show. We focused on late 1940's and early 1950's swing styles. Artists like Joe Williams with Count Basie, Bobby Bland, Billy Eckstein, Nat King Cole, and even some early Ray Charles... In spite of inclement weather, the streets were full of swing dancers and we had two encore requests.

Fremont was getting talked about...

People started calling me Fremont...

But there is no Fremont. We invented a totally fictitious biography for him – explaining why we used the name, but also why he never appeared with the band. We made up all sorts of things about Fremont over the years... It's funny, it resonates with people. One of my best stage lines is... I called Fremont to let him know about this gig, and he said, “How do you keep getting my number? Leave me alone! I don't play anymore!” (See the biography for details)

They called me again for 2007...

Everyone from the original cast was available! Actually, we were playing a Rhythm and Soul Review with Broadway artist Michael Mandell when the Uptown J&B gig confirmation came – the guys pulled their planners and wrote it down on the spot. What a great opportunity! I chose a bunch of 1970's funk/jazz fusion charts I'd always wanted to play, but never would have attempted without this top line group. As the last note of our opening number rang out, the crowd literally roared!

It was amazing all night long.

Mark and Charlie asked for a "powerful blues set" in 2008...

I made sure Garry Smith was available and planned a show around some big B3 sounds. I also found several charts in my library that had been written for us by Dave Merrick, who has been a contributor as a writer and performer for over a decade.

This year's set included songs from The Blues Brothers, The Allman Brothers Band, Jimmy Smith, Joey DeFrancesco, and even Herbie Hancock. It was a blast going back and doing some of these classic charts.

The best part was the new stage this year that included a light show and enough room across the front to get everyone into the spotlight. People were literally climbing over walls to get in and see. It's a regular quote now at the end of these shows where I thank the guys individually and then say to the audience, "I hope you all had at least half as much fun as I did!"

I'm really excited about 2009

Networking with cats higher up the food chain has given me access to charts that I could never get before. We'll be doing music from the "Funky 70's" again, but with the Jazz Chops these guys have - it's going to be a blast. There will also be individual features this year, each instrument takes a turn out front. I'm still taking an opportunity to arrange some things that have never appeared juxtaposed before, and draw from other recent festival experiences that were inspiring.

Each year I try to provide the most fun and entertaining show I can put together. And I appreciate the opportunity to work with this group more than I'll ever be able to articulate. This is one you won't want to miss, the closing number frightens me a little - but I've never heard anyone ever play it live before. We're taking it right to the EDGE.

Three Spontaneous Standing Ovations...

This was a fun show. The audience was great, the guys are incredible, the music was sweet. Bruce Knepper on Trumpet, Ned Boyd on Saxes and Flute, Will Frazier on Trombone. Scott Pazera on Bass, Timothy Miller on Drums, Garry Smith on Keyboards...

Ned's feature on Caravan was a show stopper. Will's solo on Mo Betta Blues went into the stratosphere for range and energy - it was just one of "those" moments I'm amazed and glad to have been a small part of.

We closed with Edgar Winter's Frankenstein.

Garry brought two keyboards, including a vintage mini moog, just for that song... We hadn't finished the first five notes before everyone jumped out of their seats. Great call, Garry.

Tim's Drum Solo brought the house down - Wow!
Thanks!

So it's not really a regular band with the same members every time...

But it gives me tremendous flexibility with the styles of music we can perform. We're already confirmed for the Uptown again next year and I'm looking at some Steely Dan, and Earth Wind and Fire charts to add to our growing book. I'm always finding new songs. It's an opportunity to exercise my writing and arranging skills, but most of all, it's FUN! The audience is the first to know if you're having fun on the stage or if you're slogging through old tunes you've done a hundred times...

I wouldn't dream of trying to fool them.

I'll continue to book as Fremont Jackson...

The Fremont Phenomenon has a momentum I probably couldn't stop if I wanted to. He's certainly more popular than I am.

It's a good problem to have. I want to thank everyone who's ever come to a show.

-- Brent Laidler