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Jazz

WITH Tuesday's second press conference, three dozen names have now been announced for the line-up of the Cape Town International Jazz Festival, set for the first weekend in April. That's almost the whole bill — though organisers sometimes hold at least one big name in reserve for a late, "surprise" announcement.

The programme is strong on popular music and world sounds.

It is names such as hip-hop star Mos Def who will grow the crowds beyond a niched jazz audience and — as the organisers always piously hope — perhaps draw new ears to jazz.

But for those seeking to put together a weekend of solid jazz listening, there is sufficient music, old and new, to appeal. And this year it could well be the South African jazz acts that have the greatest power to surprise and delight.

Most of the international jazz names need little introduction. Dianne Reeves has already enchanted Johannesburg audiences. Everybody — including me — has described reedman Dave Liebman as a "Coltrane disciple" but in fact that influence is only one on his sound: many listeners are touched most by the human, almost singing quality particularly of his soprano sax work. Listen to the 1980s album *One of a Kind* for a superb example of his approach.

Kyle Eastwood was brought to jazz by his actor/director father Clint, but is an impressive bassist in his own right.

Veteran drummer Al Foster is best known for his contribution to the later Miles Davis sound of albums such as *On the Corner*, although he's a multifaceted player, equally adept from bebop through funk to free. Maceo Parker will add the groove of the streets to the mix, while the New York Voices remain consistently stylish and swinging.

Robert Glasper is a new American piano voice and — from the theatre recital I heard in New York last year — a very compelling one, combining jazz technique and imagination with fresh ideas drawn from hip-hop and new music.

And, depending on the repertoire he presents, the same might be true of Paris-based flautist Magic Malik, an unknown quantity who has worked with, among others, experimentalist Steve Coleman and nu-jazzers St Germain.

But it is the home team that ought to be exciting audiences this year. It is headed by veteran Hugh Masekela, and while the trumpeter is likely to present a reassuringly in-character bill of fare, the quality of his playing these days is better than ever.

Phillip Tabane resolutely and correctly resists genre labels, but the singer/guitarist never does the expected and that, for many, puts him in the jazz bag.

Equally powerful in their originality are Carlo Mombelli and the Prisoners of Strange. Again, labels such as "avant-garde" may mislead: Mombelli's intricately textured, witty, enchanting music has built a huge following as dismissive of pigeonholing as the band is.

Another powerful maverick is Capetonian pianist/poet/multi-instrumentalist Kyle Shepherd, who combines elements of all his talents into works that certainly live in the jazz world but are never imprisoned by it.

When I lectured on South African jazz in America, one player whose recordings consistently drew huge interest was McCoy Mrubata. Here, in the company of Paul Hanmer, Louis Mhlanga, Herbie Tsoaeli and Kesivan Naidoo, the reedman celebrates his 50th birthday with sounds that grow increasingly exploratory, recalling Eastern Cape jazz innovators such as the late Eric Nomvete.

And another creative reedman, Russ Nerwich, brings a new project: *Collective Imagination*.

Add to these more established artists and fresh young names (for a complete list visit www.capetownjazzfest.com) and it will be possible to put together a

weekend that rubs shoulders with multiple genres in the corridors, but at the same time thoroughly satisfies jazz ears.

Gwen Ansell

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