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Tap Dance Jam Marks Decade of Fancy Footwork

By David Steinberg
Journal Staff Writer

The 2008 edition of New Mexico Tap Dance Jam celebrates its 10th anniversary and pays tribute to Bill Evans.

Evans, a veteran dancer and choreographer who taught at the University of New Mexico, started the Tap Dance Jam.

“Bill's not here (for the concerts), but we are continuing his legacy,” said Jackie Oliver, artistic director of the Tap Dance Jam.

Oliver is part of a core group called the Bill Evans Rhythm Tap Ensemble that will perform in paired concerts tonight and Saturday in UNM's Keller Hall.

A major work the ensemble will do is “Freddy the Freeloader,” which Evans had set in 2003. The 11-minute work, performed to Miles Davis' composition of the same name, opens the show.

“It explores some intricate rhythm,” Oliver said.

In the ensemble with Oliver are Wendy Leverenz Barker, Sara Hutchinson, Jesse Martinez, Robbie Peterson, Guy Mannick, Zane Barker and Leslie Barnard. Peterson, Brenna Kuhn and Misty Owens will be dancing in solo numbers.

Owens, reached at her home in Brooklyn, N.Y., said her solo is set to Dizzy Gillespie's famous Latin jazz composition “A Night in Tunisia.”

“It's a premiere,” Owens said. “I love a little Latin. ...The music changes in tempo from Latin to swing, so I'll be showing the two different meters of the music.”

Owens, who received a bachelor's degree from UNM, teaches at four schools in the New York City area and is on the faculty of the Mark Morris Dance Group. She also directs Fulton Feet Express, a teen rhythm tap dance company that does extensive community outreach.

In 2006 Owens was named Teacher of the Year by the New York City Tap Festival.

“I am thrilled to be coming back and reconnect with the tap community,” said Owens.

The show will close with several classical tap pieces. One is a suite of classic tap choreography by Honi Coles, Cholly Atkins and Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Oliver said.

“It's a collaboration of different artists to express the joy of these traditional tap dances,” Owens said.

Also performing in the concerts are students in National Dance Institute of New Mexico's classes in Albuquerque and in Santa Fe as well as students at Fishback Studio of the Dance.

Pianist Jeff Brown and drummer Stuart Smith will accompany dancers.

A series of workshops, including master tap classes, will be held Monday, June 16, through Thursday, June 19, at UNM's Carlisle Gym.

For more information call 872-1800, ext. 1103.