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MUSIC REVIEW: Clockwork takes familiar jazz and adds unique spin

San Francisco-based quartet has Maui ties

By RON YOUNGBLOOD, Staff Writer

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There is nothing easy about vocalese, but the quartet Clockwork will put any jazz fan completely at ease. The San Francisco-area group - including a Maui girl - produces music to curl up in, but don't get too comfortable. The group can blow you away, artistically and sonically.

Webster's defines vocalese as "a form of jazz singing in which lyrics are composed for and sung to the music taken from already existing instrumental jazz recordings." What's missing from that definition are Clockwork's harmonies, chords that are at once familiar and surprising.

Soprano Angie Doctor, alto Juliet Green, tenor John Paddock and bass Dave Durban are an ensemble of singers who obviously love the music, enjoy each other's company and delight in performing.

Make no mistake, this is a jazz group. At various times they do pieces in the finest tradition of big bands, combos and smoky after-hours balladeers. Clockwork also ventures into a cappella music that that would be right at home at a madrigal concert. All of it is done with a harmonic richness that speaks volumes about musicianship and artful arrangements.

Clockwork came to Maui basically because Seabury Hall graduate Juliet Green wanted to honor her musician-composer-arranger father Pat Green who died Nov. 4. For decades, Pat Green was an integral part of the Maui music scene, playing piano with all sorts of notables, arranging and conducting choral works and ministering to abused pianos.

The sentimental journey turned into a series of performances on Mana'o Radio, a Rotary club meeting, Pat Green's Celebration of Life at Makawao Union Church and a concert Sunday afternoon in the Seabury Hall Performing Arts Center.

The Mana'o gig was performed after being on the island about 24 hours and was a chocolate box sampler. With little rehearsal, local bass maestro Bob Harrison sounded as if he had been working with the group for years. Local drummer Mike Buono added his skill for the Sunday concert. At the memorial the day before the concert, the group blended in with the Olinda Chorale and other local singers, doing Pat Green compositions and arrangements backed by pianist Gene Argel, bassist Doug White and Buono.

Listening to Clockwork is a memorable treat - for jazz fans and those who love the human voice - but in full performance mode the group displays a talent for visually emphasizing lyrics and emotional content. Banter and interplay between tunes prove these singers are serious about their music but they don't take themselves seriously.

The 16 tunes performed Sunday ranged from the whimsical "Who's Blues" with Juliet's Seuss-based lyrics, to jazz-standard "Mellow Tone," to "Peel Me A Grape" to gospel-tinged "The Water is Wide" to be-boppish "Yearnin'" and "Tenor Madness." Beginning with the easy-to-take "Rhode Island," the concert concluded with a lift-the-roof sermon, "None of Us are Free." The encore was a return to the familiar "Nightingale."

Vocalese calls not only for unerring pitch but fast mouths. Clockwork has crisp enunciation even when the music is at warp speed. Lyrics are paramount, but for at least one member of the audience, the chicken skin came from unerring harmonies.

Clockwork bases its work on more than a half-century of vocal and jazz instrumental music and does it respectfully, but builds their own unique approach and sound on that foundation. At the standing-ovation conclusion of the concert, Doctor said the singers would be returning to Maui in the near future. They can't come too soon.

* Ron Youngblood can be reached at youngblood@mauinews.com.

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