

By JAMI KUNZER – jkunzer@nwherald.com

Tito Puente Jr. celebrates diversity

Every time Tito Puente Jr. steps on stage, he celebrates his heritage.

When he performs at the Raue Center For The Arts this Saturday, he'll also be celebrating Hispanic Heritage Month.

Puente Jr. is among a line-up of shows scheduled at the Raue this month to explore the diversity of the entire Hispanic community. His show takes place 7:30 p.m. Sept. 17. Ticket prices are \$50, \$47 and \$44.

"I advise you highly to bring your dancing shoes," Puente Jr. said of the upcoming concert, which will include his five-piece band and a performance of high-energy, mambo-style music inspired by his legendary father, the late Tito Puente Sr. Known as "The King of Latin Music," Puente Sr. died in 2000.

Along with Puente Jr., Hispanic Heritage Month events at the Raue include The Passionate Frida presented by the Judith Svalander Dance Theatre and an Agua Dulce food and drink event featuring the unique flavors of Latin America.

The celebration begins at 7 p.m. tonight with Get Lit(erary), Hispanic folklore themed dramatic readings and interpretations of classic pieces of literature at La Petit Marche, across the street from the Raue, 19 N. Williams St.

For a complete program line-up, details and tickets, go to www.rauecenter.org.

Here's more of what Puente Jr. had to say about his music and his heritage.

Tell us about your upcoming concert.

The music is going to be very danceable and infectious. I have not gone to one single performing arts center where people can sit and watch the show. It's just one of those concerts where it's hard to sit. I don't do any ballads or anything like that in my concerts.

It's a family oriented concert. I'm going to take you on a trip, a history trip of how the mambo was invented in the 1950s, and it's almost like a timeline of my father's career and mine, how I became Tito Puente Jr.

You didn't initially plan to follow in your father's footsteps?

I did not. That wasn't in the cards. All of a sudden a wild card came out, and I ended up gravitating toward Latin music. I was originally doing pop and hip hop. Prior to that, I was doing rock music. I was a drummer originally. I was going in a completely different direction.

As I got older and spent more time with my father, I traveled with him a bit more. I gravitated toward the clave, the Latin metronome.

What's it like to follow in his footsteps? I'm sure the comparisons are endless.

I look like him, but I don't have the white hair yet. I have his mannerisms in some sort of ways. The difference between my father and myself is that I have a quirkiness to myself. I have a Tito Puente Jr. style.

I have a quirkiness that's a little bit more modern. I'm Tito Puente 2.0. It's like a modern version of a 1950s version of my father.

I love being his son and I embrace it and I'm proud of it. I know I have some big shoes to fill, but I'm very content with that. I know it's my destiny to keep his tradition and his music alive.

Did you actually learn music from your father?

No, he did not teach me. He only taught me how to be a good father to my children. He made sure I got my education. He only guided me. He never sat down and showed me the rudiments or anything like that. He was very encouraging of me, taking me to school and making sure I got my education.

I'm glad I learned that way. It would have been too easy learning from a master percussionist like Tito Puente.

I'm glad he instilled in me my education through the grass-roots way of learning. He never sat down to say, 'Hey do you know how to play this or that?'

I remember as a child having a xylophone set when I was 3. With my son, Tito Puente III, he's 3 years old and I gave him moroccos and bongos. He's too into Thomas the Train right now. Hopefully, he'll take after his grandfather.

You've recently released a CD.

My latest CD is called, "Got Mambo?" (Found at www.gotmambo.com, along with tour dates.)

This is my second recording since my father passed away. (The first was "In My Father's Shoes.") I added singers Bobby Cruz, Hansel & Raul. These gentlemen are phenomenal in their own careers. They're fabulous singers and worked with my father in the 1950s and 60s. It's nice to see my uncles, if you will, on this new record. I'm branching out with some original material on this album.

I just came back from Australia and Israel, and we're heading to Germany. It's an amazing opportunity to bring forth the music of Tito Puente. I never realized how famous my father's music was until I traveled abroad. There are so many new fans I'm making because of the fans my father had.

It's a great time for Latin music, a force to be reckoned with.

WHAT: Tito Puente Jr. in concert

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Sept. 17

WHERE: Raue Center For The Arts, Crystal Lake

COST: \$50, \$47, \$44

INFO: www.rauecenter.org

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