

Blowing young and hard: big-band fever hits Cape Town

ROBYN COHEN

BIG BANDS are very hip and happening in our city – particularly among teens, as evidenced by sold-out gigs at the Big Band Jazz Festival held at the Baxter last week.

The buzz will continue next weekend when the acclaimed Delft Big Band plays at Artscape's Youth Jazz Festival. The band, conducted by veteran trumpeter Ian Smith, shares the stage with young soloists. There are just two performances.

Cape youngsters are signing up in droves to be part of the big-band phenomenon, as musicians and fans. Local schools with decent music departments are getting into the big-band groove with gusto.

Indeed, when the Baxter's Big Band Jazz Festival was on last week, I received several calls from people looking for tickets.

Rapturous applause is what the six members of the Delft Big Band received when they played last month in Sweden. They were there to perform at the award ceremony for the World Children's Prize, awarded annually to people who have lobbied and worked for children's rights. Previous recipients include Nelson Mandela and Graca Machel.

The Delft Big Band wowed the crowds, says Ian Smith. "They said



SOLOISTS: Delft Big Band's Dayna Pearce, Matthew Ehrenreich, Adelia Douw and Sandile Gontsana.

PICTURE: HANNES THIART

that we are the best band that they have had from South Africa and have invited us back in November for a corporate function."

In fewer than three years on the band scene, the Delft Big Band has had a meteoric rise, playing at prestigious gigs like the Cape Town International Jazz Festival and other high-profile events – remarkable for an outfit that was formed in mid-2008 as an initiative by the Department of Social Development, with start-up funding from non-government organisation Cape Outdoor Adventure Service and Training.

The initiative was about targeting vulnerable youth from high schools in Leiden, Rosendal, Voorbrug and adjacent communities but, with Smith on board, the band has gone beyond simply ticking all the right boxes, such as getting youth off the streets and teaching them music.

Smith was determined to develop a band of excellence with professional status. It is all very well saying you want to empower people, but Smith felt it was imperative to pay performance fees to the members, and from the start of the project he has endeavoured to do

that. For many of the 70 musicians in the band, music-making is literally putting bread on the table and keeping families going.

It is an ongoing battle, as Smith has to somehow find money to pay for everything from instrument repairs to transport. Much of the hard cash has been generated from his earnings as a trumpeter at venues like Pigalle and from his band Virtual Jazz Reality.

He recently scaled back his own work in order to give his all to the project, but that means he is without an income. Tragically, his son was killed in an accident while Smith was with the band in Sweden and yet he has managed to keep going. The show must go on, he believes, and with the prestigious Artscape Youth Jazz Festival platform it is all the more reason to deliver a class act.

Over the years Artscape's Youth Jazz Festival has done much to fast-track the careers of young musicians and the alumni of the programme have gone on to mentor others coming through the ranks. For this year's event they invited Smith and the Delft Big Band to take the spotlight. Smith then auditioned soloists and selected Lorenzo Blignaut, 19, Adelia Douw, 17, Dayna Pearce 20, Matthew Ehrenreich, 18, Sandile Gontsana, 26, and Mark Williams, 22. Two of them – Blignaut

(saxophone) and Douw (vocals) – are members of the band and Pearce (clarinet) is Smith's assistant musical director.

Each soloist has an impressive CV. Mark Williams (guitar), for example, has played at the Montreal Jazz Festival, the Womad Music Festival, at the Cape Town International Jazz Festival (three times) and has accompanied Simphiwe Dana.

Blignaut has also performed at his share of high-profile events and is studying at the SA College of Music at UCT. When he says he wants "to become a famous trumpet player like Ian Smith", he underlines the role that Smith has played in the careers of these players. Several are studying music at UCT and he is very proud of them.

A modest man who glosses over the considerable achievements in his long career, Smith, 62, says the youngsters take his breath away with their talent. He hardly needs to pick up his own trumpet any more because, "I tell you, Lorenzo (Blignaut) will outstrip me in no time".

● Artscape's Youth Jazz Festival is at 7.30pm on Saturday and at 4pm Next Sunday. Tickets cost R75. Seating is unreserved. Book through Artscape Dial-a-seat 021 421 7695, Computicket on 083 915 8000 or www.computicket.com