San Diego Ballet’s ‘Bird/LAND’ a family affair for sax great Charles McPherson and dancer daughter Camille

Their three San Diego Ballet performances at the Mingei International Museum in Balboa Park will also feature a world premiere of trumpeter Gilbert Castellanos’ “Mi Tierra,” choreographed by Javier Velasco

BY GEORGE VARGA
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Filled with parental pride, saxophone great Charles McPherson listened in
rapt attention during a recent joint interview with his daughter, San Diego Ballet standout Camille McPherson. So rapt, in fact, that she became distracted by him as she answered a question.

“Dad! You’re breathing really loudly into the phone!” Camille said.

“Sorry, I didn’t know,” her father apologized, speaking from a different landline in their Talmadge home.

With the impeccable timing of a master musician, he waited a beat before wryly adding: “I’ll stop breathing.”

This playful exchange is characteristic of the loving relationship between Camille, 29, and her internationally celebrated father, who will turn 83 in July.

The two have interchangeable pet names for each other (“Bubby” and “Bub” are two favorites).

They speak with palpable warmth and admiration as they recount recent and long-ago anecdotes with a lilt in their voices. They laugh in unison when Camille points out that neither of her parents know how to operate the remote control for their TV set.

“That’s true!” Lynn McPherson, Camille’s mother and Charles’ wife and manager, later acknowledged. “We have a very close and wonderful family dynamic — unless I’m trying to boss everybody around, and they ignore me!”
That family dynamic is professional as well as personal. Father and daughter conveyed an equally infectious enthusiasm about their upcoming San Diego Ballet performances of “Bird/LAND,” which will take place next Friday through Feb. 13 at the Mingei International Museum in Balboa Park.

The performances will also feature dances set to top San Diego trumpeter Gilbert Castellanos’ seven-part suite, “Mi Tierra” (“My Land”). McPherson and Castellanos, San Diego Ballet’s composers-in-residence, will accompany the dancers with their respective bands.

“Charles is my hero, and it’s a huge honor for me to share the stage with him,” said Castellanos, the founder of the Young Lions Jazz Academy and the San Diego Symphony’s jazz curator.

“Every moment I’m in the same room with Charles, I’m really listening — as a student — and absorbing everything like a sponge, on and off the bandstand.”

When not recording or doing concerts across the nation or abroad, jazz sax great Charles McPherson is a composer-in-residence for San Diego Ballet. His daughter, Camille, is one of the troupe’s principal dancers. (Howard Lipin / The San Diego Union-Tribune)
Rich harmonic changes

The McPhersons’ half of the Mingei performances will feature jazz classics from the Charlie Parker songbook, including “Tico Tico” and “My Little Suede Shoes.”

They have been newly arranged by the elder McPherson with vocals by Lorraine Theresa and choreography by San Diego Ballet Artistic Director Javier Velasco. (Parker, who died in 1955, is still fondly known by fans as “Bird,” short for his nickname, “Yardbird.”)

“The really nice thing about my dad’s music and his arrangements is that the harmonic changes are so rich,” said Camille, who teaches dance and works as an administrator for San Diego Ballet.

“The consideration for me,” Charles noted, “is that the dancers are not improvising. That means you need to have very set things in your compositions that happen the same way every time. At the same time, the improvisational aspect of jazz is very strong.

“So whether it’s my own compositions or re-arranging Charlie Parker, if I’m coming up with music for ballet, I have to balance those two things and make sure both are adhered to. And there’s a way to do that.”

McPherson, whose first solo album — ”Be-Bop Revisited” — came out in 1964, rose to fame that same decade in bass great Charles Mingus’ band and was a pivotal contributor to Clint Eastwood’s 1988 Parker biopic, “Bird.” A
longtime San Diego resident, McPherson has earned widespread praise for expertly saluting Parker’s legacy and for going well beyond it with his own music.

“To me, the name ‘Charlie Parker’ is synonymous with my dad,” Camille said. “They are inseparable.”

Her father joked that Camille had “been brainwashed” by hearing so much of his and Parker’s music from a very early age.

“‘Bird’ had a perfect balance of head and heart left-brain/right-brain, inspiration and technique, craft and art,” Charles said.

“And one thing that makes ‘Bird’ great isn’t just the fact he’s playing a lot of notes in a very clean manner. It’s the linear logic of how the musical sentences — with all these notes — are connecting so seamlessly with other musical sentences.

“So, even people who might not be jazz fans get a sense that there’s a certain logic happening that they don’t necessarily hear with other players.”

For Velasco, having McPherson and Castellanos create music for San Diego Ballet’s “Bird/LAND is a double treat, albeit a delayed one. Had all gone according to plan, the performances would have taken place in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a two-year delay.

“We are thrilled to have created a performance that celebrates Jazz music in
this beautiful way with our two composers-in-residence,” Velasco said.

“The Mingei, which is so intimate and personal, is the perfect setting. Something unique about this performance is that it will be done in an indoor-outdoor setting, and San Diego Ballet is one of the first to use the venue in this way. The audience will be seated indoors, and the dancers and musicians will move between the indoor and outdoor area, which features a four-level terrace.”

Charles McPherson and Randy Porter are shown at a livestreamed 2021 performance at the Athenaeum in La Jolla. (Daniel Atkinson)

Recent accolades

McPherson’s latest release, “Jazz Dance Suites,” was voted 2020’s Album of the Year by the readers of JazzTimes magazine. The readers also voted him Artist of the Year. Wynton Marsalis and Diana Krall placed second and third,
respectively.

When the pandemic forced him to cancel all his concert tour dates for 2020 and 2021, McPherson pivoted to online performances and teaching via Zoom. He also gave the first drive-in concert of his career, under the auspices of Mainly Mozart.

Before hitting the road again in March, he’ll be honored Feb. 18 and 19 in his Missouri hometown of Joplin.

Originally scheduled to take place last year as part of Missouri’s bicentennial, “Charles McPherson: The Journey Home” will feature concerts, workshops and more.

Camille and Lynn McPherson will be in attendance. So will Charles’ children from his first marriage, including son Chuckie, who will drum in the band specially assembled for the event. Camille will dance on stage when her father performs “Hear My Plea,” a standout piece from his “Jazz Dance Suites” album.

“I left Joplin in 1948 when I was 9 and we moved to Detroit. I haven’t been back there since I became a professional musician (in the late 1950s),” Charles said.

“Langston Hughes is from Joplin. I think we lived on the same street at one time, although he was a lot older than me. What’s nice is that they’ll be declaring it ‘Charles McPherson Day’ and Lynn, my kids, my grandkids, and
my great grandkids will be there to see it.

“Every year, on Emancipation Day, a great (jazz) band would come to play in Joplin, and I remember seeing them when I was 5 or 6. That’s when I got very interested in music. Then, I heard Charlie Parker and I knew this is what I wanted to do.”

San Diego Ballet presents “Bird/LAND,” featuring music by Charles McPherson and Gilbert Castellanos

When: 7 p.m. next Friday and Saturday, 2:30 p.m. Feb. 13

Where: Mingei International Museum, 1439 El Prado, Balboa Park

Tickets: Sold out

Online: sandiegoballet.org

Health protocols: Masks required while indoors. Proof of COVID-19 vaccination is required, or of a negative PCR test within 72 hours of the event or a negative rapid test within 24 hours of the event.