

George Young: a Musician With Real Range

There's a bit of East Coast in George Young's speaking voice. But the music that emits from the bell of his horn is universal. You may not recognize Young standing next to you in an elevator, but chances are very good that you've heard his music in one.

That's not to say that Young plays "elevator music" in the pejorative sense, but merely illustrates how ubiquitous he has become in his long career as a sideman and studio musician. A master of all saxophones and most woodwinds, he's performed with more celebrities than Ed Sullivan—and played on his show too. A partial list takes up a page of three single-spaced columns.

Talk about eclectic: Frankie Avalon, Pearl Bailey. Garth Brooks, Mel Brooks. Art Garfunkel, Stan Getz. Mick Jagger, Dolly Parton. Michel LeGrand, John Lennon. Adam Sandler, Frank Sinatra. You get the picture.

Not to say that he has toiled in complete anonymity. Watching "Saturday Night Live" reruns, you might have noticed a bearded, Panama-hat-topped figure laughing behind the guest host's monologue. That would be Young, holding down one of the gigs most musicians only dream about.

A Philly native, and now a Carmel Valley resident, George Opalisky grew up in a musical family. His self-taught father played saxophone with his brothers every chance he could. One day young George pulled out his



Photo: Kelli Urdahl

A frequent Monterey Jazz Festival performer, George Young has also played with Mick Jagger, Chubby Checker and the "Saturday Night Live" band.

dad's beloved horn, started toodling and hasn't looked back since. By his early teens he was leading his own band. When a club owner told him Opalisky wouldn't fit on a marquee, George changed his stage name to Young—partly in reference to his age.

His first experiences in recording studios were sessions for Bobby Rydell's "Kissing Time" and "Let's Twist Again Like We Did Last Summer" by Chubby Checker. And so began the journey that led to 40 years (and counting) of recording, performing and touring.

These days—lucky for us—this musician's musician can be heard around the Peninsula. Many evenings find him playing

at the Monterey Hyatt and he can be seen on the Garden Stage at the Monterey Jazz Festival on Friday September 19, performing with an all-star quartet of local musicians. George will also be presenting a master class at Hidden Valley Music Seminars in Carmel Valley August 17-22, with a recital on the 18th.

So with that list of performers under his belt, who is on Young's wish list to play with? He quickly answers: "Ella." Although that won't be possible—at least in this world—he also mentions Andrea Bocelli and several others. Chances are good that his reputation will carry him to a studio or stage with all of them. Don't worry, George. You're still Young.

—Michael Chatfield