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## Music

# 2 stars meet in series opener

*Geri Allen, John Handy team for Jazz at Leshler concert*

**By Andrew Gilbert**  
Correspondent

One sure sign of a well-curated concert series is that it offers shows you can't see anywhere else. By that measure, the fifth Jazz at the Leshler Center season (aka the Walnut Creek Jazz Experience) punches well above its weight class on the Bay Area cultural scene. But what really makes the series a contender for the jazz lover's seal of approval is the consistently high quality of the acts.

Presented by the Diablo Regional Arts Association, Jazz at Leshler features eight concerts over four Saturdays, kicking off July 30 with the Geri Allen Quartet. A jazz luminary for more than three decades, Allen is a brilliant pianist who is always looking for new creative avenues.

In recent years the Detroit native has toured and recorded with a super trio featuring bassist Esperanza Spalding and drummer Terri Lyne Carrington and crafted a soulful tribute to her hometown via her stripped-down instrumental arrangements of Motown hits, documented on her latest album "Grand River Crossings" (Motéma Music). For her Leshler season opener, Allen has arranged a first-time encounter with a jazz legend, alto saxophonist John Handy.

Still going strong at 83, Handy is a perpetually hip musical explorer whose searing sound first made an impression on several classic albums by Charles Mingus in 1959, particularly "Mingus Ah Um." The Oakland-raised Handy earned



JOHN GREEN/STAFF ARCHIVES

Renowned pianist Geri Allen teams with sax legend John Handy, an Oakland native, when she kicks off the Jazz at the Leshler concert series in Walnut Creek on Saturday.

renown as a leader in his own right 50 years ago with the release of his Columbia debut "Recorded Live at the Monterey Jazz Festival," a session that still sounds strikingly contemporary.

For the rhythm section, Allen selected a superlative Bay Area tandem of bassist Jeff Chambers and drummer Akira Tana. She decided Saturday's concert offered an ideal opportunity to connect with a revered innovator who's been featured on too few Bay Area stages over the past decade. "I've been familiar with John Handy's body of work for many years," Allen says, "and I'm honored that he was able to make time to join me for this performance."

While Allen's concert offers the frisson of a first-time encounter, the Aug. 6 "Warren Vaché Quintet Remembers Benny Carter" program features a well-traveled ensemble devoted to a beautiful and oft-overlooked body of tunes. Like the 2015 album of the same name, Vaché's cast includes the big-toned and irrepressibly swinging tenor

saxophonist Houston Person, bassist/vocalist Nicki Parrott, pianist Tardo Hammer and drummer Leroy Williams, a hard bop expert in his late 70s whose resume includes a passel of jazz giants, from Sonny Rollins and Stan Getz to Thelonious Monk.

Where Handy has always looked to the future in his music, Vaché brings an elegant, exuberant lyricism to the cornet, trumpet and fluegelhorn, an approach inspired largely by horn stars of the 1920s and '30s such as Louis Armstrong, Roy Eldridge, and Pee Wee Erwin (who mentored Vaché during his formative years growing up in New Jersey). Associated with the neo-swing cadre who recorded for Concord Jazz in the 1970s and '80s, he was once a regular presence in the Bay Area, but now Vaché is one of those veteran masters neglected by high-profile venues while playing with complete authority.

Kudos to Jazz at Leshler's artistic advisor Daniel Levenstein for booking Vaché, particularly with a program so rewarding. A pioneering

## THE GERI ALLEN QUARTET

Kicking off Jazz at the Leshler concert series

**When:** 5 and 8 p.m. July 30

**Where:** Leshler Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive., Walnut Creek

**Tickets:** \$40 (\$125 for complete series); 925-943-7469, [www.LeshlerJazz.org](http://www.LeshlerJazz.org)

**Remaining acts:** Warren Vaché Quintet (Aug. 6), Arturo Sandoval (Aug. 20), Mark O'Connor's Hot Swing (Aug. 27)

alto saxophonist and accomplished trumpeter, Benny Carter (dubbed King Carter by his colleagues) was one of jazz's greatest figures from the mid-1920s until his death at 95 in 2003. Vaché considered him a mentor, and Carter selected the cornetist as a featured soloist on two MusicMasters albums devoted to his songs in the mid-1990s. Vaché revisits Carter's compositions with his quintet, from standards like "When Lights Are Low" and "Key Largo" to lesser-known numbers like "Souvenir" and "The Romp."

The series continues on Aug. 20 with Cuban trumpet star Arturo Sandoval, a regular presence in the Bay Area who combines prodigious power and ebullient showmanship, and concludes on Aug. 27 with fiddler Mark O'Connor's Hot Swing. Well known for his popular collaborations with elite musicians such as Yo-Yo Ma, Bela Fleck and Itzhak Perlman, O'Connor is touring with a band that features his wife, the acclaimed fiddler Maggie O'Connor, and their son, rising mandolinist and vocalist Forrest O'Connor, fiddler/vocalist Kate Lee, guitarist Joe Smart and banjo player Geoff Saunders.

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