new jazz hero Kamasi Washington and his empathetic band of musical allies have been carving out a remarkable success saga in the past couple of years, with at least two surprising elements attached. The band is an "LA Story," proudly born, raised and still hailing from Los Angeles (possibly the most important jazz group ever to come out of that city); and their very jazz-grounded and mostly acoustic sound has found a surprising foothold in "rock" quarters.

After being named one of the "50 Most Influential Person in Jazz of 2015" by Downbeat, Kamasi Washington and his band have been making waves in the jazz world. Their debut album "Epic" was released in 2015, and it quickly became a critical and commercial success. Since then, they have continued to tour and release new music, establishing themselves as one of the most promising jazz groups of the 21st century.

Kamasi Washington and The Next Step
When: 8 p.m., Thursday
Where: UCSB Campbell Hall
Cost: $25-$50, $15 all students
Information: 893-3535, artsandlectures.sa.ucsb.edu

Kamasi and his musical allies, The Next Step, will perform at UCSB Campbell Hall Thursday.

News-Press: I last spoke to you shortly before you played the massive Coachella festival last April. How was that experience, working on that scale and in a rock festival scenario?

Kamasi Washington: Oh, it was amazing. It was the first of the camping ground festivals that we did. Man, it was great. It was so fun playing to that audience. A lot of the people who were there had never heard us, and some of them had never heard jazz, or at least never been to a jazz concert. It felt like we were breaking new ground. It was pretty fun.

NP: It is still amazing, and inspiring, that you have reached out and broken new ground and broken through these barriers of demographics and what certain audiences are supposed to listen to. Was that ever an intention of yours, or just an incidental byproduct of what’s happened with the group?

KW: I’ve always wanted to get my music out there and have people experience it. I’ve always wanted to share that. As a musician, that’s what you are. You want to share yourself with the world, with other people. It’s like an exchange. You give them music with people and then give you vibes back, and that fills you up to make more music.

With the music that myself and my friends make, for a long time, we were kind of sitting on the sidelines and people were saying “Oh, no one wants to hear that. No one likes that music. It’s dying” — all these negative things. We always felt like “no, we play our music for people and they love it!” So we were excited to get out there and play this music for people. People were saying that, but they were the people who really hadn’t been to a jazz show or didn’t really listen to the music.

NP: Especially when they hear you live and feel the electricity of what’s going on, with the communal energy attached, that must be where they really get the music.

KW: Yeah. It’s an experience. That’s the thing about jazz that people are missing, that communal sense of togetherness. Jazz is especially that way. Everyone is expressing themselves and there’s an equality to the music. It’s a bit unique. It’s not so individually driven. It’s a very group music, with the idea of interplay and interaction. It’s a group of people expressing their creativity together, at the same time.

NP: Thinking about all that you’ve done and all the music you’ve played through the years, you have a lot of musical languages that you could be channeling. Do those bubble up in the creative process, as you’re deciding which way to turn with your work?

KW: Yeah. Music is like a sea for me. It’s very elemental. It can come in different forms. Sometimes it’s a chord, sometimes it’s a part of a melody, other times it’s an idea of how to make a song. I just did a thing called “Harmony of
Movie Trailers

PLEASE NOTE: Santa Barbara International Film Festival and screenings are scheduled to take place at theater venues throughout Santa Barbara, ending Sunday.

“20th Century Women”
Three women explore their own relationships and freedom, while also helping one of their sons to grow up to be a good man — primarily set in Santa Barbara. (1:58) R.

“The Comedian”
Robert De Niro stars as an aging insult comic named Jack Burke. All-star cast includes Danny DeVito, Harvey Keitel, Edie Falco, Jimmie Walker and Billy Crystal. (1:59) R.

“A Cure for Wellness”
Director Gore Verbinski’s latest, about an ambitious young executive who is sent to retrieve his company’s CEO from an idyllic but mysterious “wellness center” whose treatments are not what they seem. (2:26) R.

“Hidden Figures”
An uplifting tale of a team of three brilliant African-American women who provide NASA with important mathematical data needed to launch the program’s first successful space missions. Based on a true story. (2:07) PG.

“John Wick: Chapter 2”
After returning to the criminal underworld to repay a debt, John Wick discovers that a large bounty has been put on his life. (2:02) R.

“La La Land”
An aspiring actress and a jazz musician attempt to keep their love affair from crumbling when they achieve success. (2:08) PG-13.

“The Lego Batman Movie”
Bruce Wayne has his hands full while trying to deal with the criminals of Gotham while also raising a boy he adopted, who just might become his sidekick. (1:44) PG.

“Lion”
At the age of 30, a man sets out to find his parents who provided him with the map to his journey that takes him places he never thought he would go. (1:58) PG-13.

“Manchester by the Sea”
Lee comes home to care for his teenage nephew, whose father has passed away, which forces Lee to deal with the memories he had purposely kept behind. (2:17) R.

“Moonlight”
Director Barry Jenkins’ film chronicles the life of a young black man from childhood to adulthood as he struggles to find his place in the world while growing up in a rough neighborhood in Miami. (1:51) R.

“Rings”
After watching a cryptic video, a young woman finds herself on the receiving end of a terrifying curse that threatens to take her life in seven days. (1:42) PG-13.

“Rogue One: A Star Wars Story”
The Rebellion finds out about the Death Star, and sends a team of rebels to steal the plans. (2:13) PG-13.

“The Space Between Us”
The first human born on Mars travels to Earth for the first time; a street smart girl helps him discover how he came to be. (2:01) PG-13.

“Split”
Three girls are kidnapped by a man with 24 distinct personalities, and the personalities that can help them. (1:57) PG-13.

Ratings by the Motion Picture Association of America are: (G) for general audiences; (PG) parental guidance suggested; (PG-13) parental guidance strongly suggested; (R) restricted, children under 17 not admitted; (NC-17) no one under 17 admitted; (NR) no rating.

— Tribune News Service

MUSIC

KAMASI
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“Difference.” I was dealing with the idea and the reality that some of the most beautiful things we have is a combination of different things, as opposed to a delegation of similar things. The most beautiful painting is a combination of colors. Your favorite meal is a combination of flavors. You see the beautiful scenery, but because there are mountains, trees, sky, sun, moon, stars — all those things come together to make the beautiful things that we have.

I wrote a six-part suite in which the first five parts are separate songs, and then the sixth part of the suite is us playing all five parts at the same time. That was the challenge and the idea. I had to write music with that idea in mind. For me, when I write music, it can be like that. Sometimes, I’ll just be sitting around and a rhythm will just come into my head. I think, “Wow, that’s a cool rhythm.” Then I try to see what I can do with that. You grow it. You don’t really know what’s going to be until you work with it.

NP: I was just listening to your tune from “The Epic” called “The Rhythm Changes,” a great piece with a clever title, based on the age-old jazz tradition of rhythm changes. With its lyric and bold character, it almost feels like an anthem. Is that how you view that tune?

KW: Yeah. In jazz, there’s so much pressure to kind of showcase your understanding and knowledge of the history of the music, to the point where you’re trying to express yourself as a jazz musician, you can feel a bit ignored. It’s like, “I don’t care about what you’re trying to do, how well do you understand who that person’s favorite saxophone player is.”

For me, it was just understanding that everything changes, and change is a good thing. Changing is not that search for a repeat or a second coming or whatever it is. That isn’t really what it is. Change is what makes life what it is. Musically, for us, we have always felt a bit different. Because of that, we didn’t really fit in anywhere. If you play jazz, you have to fit in. That was always something we struggled with. Right now, we’re not struggling, but for years, we did.

We were talented and blessed and all of us were playing with amazing musicians and had lots of opportunities for making music, but it just seemed like the doors weren’t open to our music, because it was always conceived as not fitting into any existing box.

NP: But now you’ve created your own box. You’ve validated, big time. You call the band The Next Step, and that was a song on your album. Related to what you’re talking about, with the evolution of the band and its success, is that almost a mantra in the band by now?

KW: Yeah, and that’s also a play on words. I named my band The Next Step. For a number of years, I’ve been playing with a number of people, like Gerald Wilson, Raphael Saadiq, Snooky, Chaka Khan, Stanley Clarke, all these different people. In high school, that was one of my dreams, to be able to play with my heroes. And it was. It was beautiful and I learned a lot. It was an important step.

But at a certain point, we were all spread out and not playing that much, because we were all playing these different gigs. We got kind of stuck in that place. We had to move on to the next step. You go out into the world and really hone your craft, and kind of find yourself. The next step is to create your own music. That was the idea of my calling the band The Next Step. We were all spread out, and I thought, “Let me try to get us back together again, and force it to happen.” We would find two days to gig when people were off the road. That was our way of holding onto the next step and what we wanted to do, not just use our talents to create music for other people. The next step was to make our own music.

The tune, “The Next Step,” was one I wrote for that band. Harmonically, the chords move in steps, and skips, of a second or a minor second. So it’s a play on words, as well.

NP: When is the next album under your name coming out?

KW: This year sometime. I’ve recorded a good part of it. I still have some writing to do, which is what I’m trying to do right now. I’m slowing things down for the next month and a half, to try and finish the writing. I’m aiming for this year.

NP: It may be one downside to your burst of popularity. You’re so busy, you don’t have as much reflective time to slow down and write new music as much as you’d like to.

KW: Yeah. I’ve definitely learned to write as I go, grabbing ideas while I’m on the road, or when I have a couple of days off. I try to give a little light switch to the creative part of my brain (laughs), a little switch you can just turn on.