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Jazz singer blends genres, cultures

Jazz singer Diane Marino understands that not everyone "gets" jazz.

It's sometimes hard to follow an improvisational piece, for example. Or, because songs outside the jazz "standards" aren't usually played on the radio, they're simply not that familiar to mainstream audiences.

So, she thought, why not use pop culture to expose more jazz music to the masses?

That's the thinking, anyway, behind her most recent album, "Just Groovin'." By taking pop songs from the 1960s and giving them a jazz twist, she said, more people will be able to explore the world of jazz music without having to stray too far from their comfort zone.

At 8 p.m. Friday, Marino will bring these reworked songs, along with some jazz standards made famous by the likes of Frank Sinatra, to The Arts Council's Smithgall Arts Center in Gainesville for another concert in the Evenings of Intimate Jazz series. Marino will be joined by husband Frank Marino on bass and Ralph Pace on drums.

She said the concert will feature a mix of music from her first two albums, plus some selections from "Just Groovin'." Based in Nashville, Tenn., Marino said she's gotten used to introducing jazz to venues that don't usually feature it — or, audiences who aren't familiar with hearing it live.

Nevertheless, she added, Nashville is much more than a country town.

"There's a lot of really good jazz players here," she said in a phone interview with The Times. "Not a lot of venues to play, but we manage to find them, or introduce new venues to jazz — just keeping it going.

"It's a misconception that it's just country music (in Nashville). It's changed quite a bit and it's growing all the time."

Because "Just Groovin'" was set to orchestral music, Marino said she had to pick Friday night's selections carefully. But the result, even as part of a trio, will be a fun surprise for the audience, she said.

"It kind of bridges that gap between popular music and jazz," she said. "I really believe in that. ... Doing entertaining songs that people can relate to, and being musically rewarding to the people (you're) playing with. It's listener-friendly jazz."

Her first two albums were straight-up jazz, she said. "Just Groovin'" was a project she had been envisioning for a few years, though, and when she decided to begin, she and her collaborators decided to take their time and do it right.

There were lots of steps to take, too. After coming up with new chord structures for the songs, Marino worked with a producer to orchestrate the rhythm, horn and string sections.

"It was a huge project, and we took our time with it and got it right," she said. "I was thinking about these songs from the '60s and so many meant a lot to me, and I thought, 'I'm not going to record them just to record them.'"

The result, almost two years later, was an album that bridged that gap between pop music and jazz.

"It was fun to do, and then hearing it at the end is amazing; it's very satisfying."

And if it's a way to help people explore a genre she loves, then even better, Marino said.

"I think anything you can do to cross over and bring people in, once you get a little taste of it, then they get curious and explore it and say, 'This is good music.'"

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What: Part of the Evenings of Intimate Jazz series

When: 8 p.m. Friday

Where: The Arts Council's Smithgall Arts Center, 331 Spring St., Gainesville

How much: \$30, \$25 each for groups of six or more

More info: 770-534-2787

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