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JAZZ Carolyn Albritton

Carolyn Albritton enjoys showcasing opportunities of the Hyde Park Jazz Festival

By Howard Reich Tribune critic

Chicago Tribune critic

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She managed Bernie Mac when no one knew who he was.

She transformed the old Cotton Club, on South Michigan Avenue, into a musical nexus (now sorely missed).

And she has nurtured jazz across the South Side, booking world-class Chicago artists into clubs, concert halls and restaurants.

But nothing Carolyn Albritton has done for culture in this city may equal the extraordinary event she unveiled last September and has dramatically enlarged for the fall.

In its maiden voyage, the Hyde Park Jazz Festival proved so successful—attracting more than 5,000 listeners to 14 hours of free concerts across the neighborhood—that an expansion was practically a foregone conclusion.

This year, Albritton has added four venues and doubled the roster of headliners to more than 30. If the weather cooperates Sept. 27, expect huge audiences to pack Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, the Hyde Park Art Center, Robie House, the Midway Plaisance and more.

Not that Albritton—who books the artists and otherwise produces the festival for a consortium of Hyde Park institutions—had any idea last year that she had a hit on her hands.

"I was shocked," she says.

"When I got to Robie House, I couldn't believe the amount of people lined up down the street, waiting to get in."

Once again this year, the event will spotlight major jazz artists, including Reginald Robinson, Nicole

Mitchell, Fred Anderson, Corey Wilkes, Kahil El'Zabar, Dee Alexander, Orbert Davis and the Chicago Jazz Orchestra. If there's a leading reason Chicagoans have swarmed to this soiree, it's the caliber and credibility of Albritton's lineup.

"She's indispensable to this effort," says James Wagner, president of the Hyde Park Jazz Society, which produces the festival in conjunction with the Hyde Park Cultural Alliance and the University of Chicago.

A Chicago native who graduated from Wendell Phillips High School on the South Side, Albritton considers herself a self-taught impresario. She achieved some of her first successes at the Cotton Club in the late 1980s, eventually bringing in no less than Cassandra Wilson, Shirley Horn, Morgana King and Stanley Turrentine to the shoebox of a room. Crowds famously queued up outside.

Albritton met comedian Mac at the open-mic sessions she inaugurated at the Cotton Club, starting in the late 1980s. Before long, she was championing his career, while reigniting live music on the South Side.

"I like putting things together," says Albritton, who manages the great Chicago jazz singer Dee Alexander.

"I enjoy showcasing them and making them the best they can be."

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