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Mike Lee lives the jazz life at Cecil's

by Zan Stewart/The Star-Ledger

Thursday July 16, 2009, 12:26 PM

Like many professional jazz musicians, Mike Lee found hearing a major-league jazz artist in person to be a life-transforming experience, one that set him on the road he travels today. For the 46-year-old Cleveland native, who has evolved into a spirited, intelligent saxophonist, woodwind player, composer, arranger, bandleader and educator, it was a performance by the great tenor saxophonist Johnny Griffin at Cleveland State University in 1978. Then a teenager, Lee, who had also been listening to records by saxophone powerhouses John Coltrane and Dexter Gordon, found that Griffin moved him in a special way.

"Griff was melodic and also played aggressively," he said. "Seeing him live, watching the band, the audience react, just turned me on. I remember saying to a friend, 'That's what I want to do.' Being a jazz musician became a career objective."

Lee worked hard, studied hard and eventually began playing with many of the best, including the Woody Herman Orchestra (directed by Frank Tiberi), Joe Lovano, the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra and Mulgrew Miller. This weekend, he will lead his own quartet, New Tricks, at Cecil's in West Orange. He also leads the club's Big Band on Mondays.

The philosophical value of music is always on Lee's mind, whether he's playing a club or jamming in his basement, teaching a student or writing a new tune. "Musicians practice for our edification, as well as for the edification of our fellow travelers," said Lee, who lives in Montclair with his wife of 18 years, violinist Rebecca Harris, and their three children: Julian, 14, an award winning saxophonist; Matthew, 7, a drummer; and Jackie, 3, who has started violin.

"In some ways, we are all musicians," continued Lee. "Music is a necessary part of who we are. It brings peace and meaning. It



Mitsu Yasukawa

Saxophonist Mike Lee appears Friday and Saturday at Cecil's in West Orange.

brings joy. It allows access to pain we need to feel."

Lee's current band, New Tricks, grew out of his experiences with Cecil's Big Band, which Joe Elefante led from 2003 to 2006, at which point Lee took over. Of that large ensemble, which ranges from driving swing to more adventurous pieces, Lee said, "It's a great musical and social community. It's inspiring how guys want to come out and play."

New Tricks, which just released its self-titled debut album on New Tricks Records, includes Lee, trumpeter Ted Chubb, bassist Kellen Harrison and drummer Shawn Baltazor. The band is comprised of "traditionalists who are also freethinkers," Lee said.

The sounds are similarly described. "The tunes are strong melodically and have clear harmonic movement, but there's always a possibility that the music could go someplace else," he said.

Lee gives credit to Cecil's and its owner, Cecil Brooks III, for the boost the room has given his musical life in general. "I can't imagine what life would be like without the club," he said. "It's basically who I am musically. It's what I'm doing every week."

It is that consistency Lee most values, even if some early dreams didn't come to fruition. "I used to think about being super famous, traveling, getting to play constantly," he said. "While those things haven't borne out, just that I have a lifestyle when I can practice my craft four-to-five hours a day is an unbelievable gift."