

Playing the mortgage

In a field that doesn't pay, jazz artist Fred Hughes stays in the black and in the scene

Fred Hughes

BY JON FERGUSON
Intelligencer Journal Staff

Pianist Fred Hughes has a CD out on a respected jazz label, recently released an instructional book through a major publisher and teaches at a good college.

Though he has all that going for him, Hughes still has to hustle every day to make a living.

It's not easy being a jazz musician, even for one as accomplished as Hughes, a Lancaster County native who returns home tonight to perform with his trio (Frank Russo on drums and Tom Williams on bass) at the Belvedere Inn.

His latest album, "No Turning Back," was released on Summit Records last year.

"This is actually the first CD I've had that somebody else has been responsible for getting it to the stores and doing the radio campaign and so on and so forth," Hughes, 41, said from his Baltimore-area home. "But that only

DETAILS

Fred Hughes Trio, tonight at 9, Belvedere Inn, 402 N. Queen St., no cover, 394-2422.

goes so far.

"The labels really don't look at putting you on the road. That's kind of your job, and it's driven by CD sales. But if you're not out on the road, you're not selling CDs, so it's a double-edged sword no matter how you look at it."

Hughes' book, "The Jazz Pianist: Left Hand Voicings and Chord Theory," was published by Warner Bros. Publications.

"You'd think the distribution levels and all that would be massive, and it is, but there are still so many products out there," Hughes said. "But it still took a call from me to get it placed in a large music

store chain around here. You still have to be out there shaking hands and doing a lot yourself."

He's an adjunct professor at Shepherd College in Shepherdstown, W.Va. It doesn't guarantee his financial security, but it helps.

"It does enable me to not have to, like in the old days, play a six-night-a-week gig in a bar to pay the mortgage," he said.

Though many young musicians turn to pop or rock with the hope of making piles of dough, nobody gets into jazz with dollar signs in their eyes. Even artists like Pat Metheny and Wynton Marsalis, two of the most popular jazz musicians in the world, can only dream of the earning power of a pop star like Britney Spears.

A jazz album that sells 100,000 copies is considered a phenomenal success. Those same numbers routinely get rock and pop artists dropped from their labels. These days, even the most famous jazz musicians are having trouble sticking with a major label.

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Fred Hughes
Jazz musician

"You sure the heck aren't getting rich out of this," Hughes, who is married and the father of two children, said. "I've been very blessed because I've been able to pay my mortgage and keep my family moving forward. The kids get what they need and what they want."

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Hughes: It's a living

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Hughes, a Hempfield High School graduate, said he has never questioned his decision to pursue jazz because the rewards have been so great.

"I realized a long time ago that some days it's going to be more difficult than others, but the creativity in what I'm able to do and what people give back to me never makes me want to question music as a profession."