

## **Using a musical talent to inspire social change**

### **Sam Miltich to share narrative of recovery and advocacy for mental health services in series of special concerts**

**By Cassandra Tuten**

**Herald-Review**

Local jazz guitarist Sam Miltich, a long-time fixture on the Minnesota jazz scene, recently became the recipient of a Minnesota State Arts Board 2018 Arts Tour Minnesota Grant for his proposal to highlight the cultural contributions of famous artists with mental illness. With a program titled "The Improvised Life: Exploring Intersections of Mental Health and Creativity through Jazz," Miltich will seek to inspire hope through his own story and original compositions.

The program will tour five communities throughout Minnesota, presenting a free daytime program at a community mental health center, followed by a ticketed evening performance at a performing arts center.

Miltich's dialogue will explore intersections of mental health and the creative process and his pursuit of well-being amidst the daily challenges of living with a serious mental illness. He will also describe his definition of recovery and the sense of purpose he cultivates through quality engagement in career and family life.

Performances will highlight the "significant contributions that some jazz musicians, specifically [Thelonious] Monk's, have brought to the world, proving a point that people with mental illness can have a significant influence on the world in a very positive way," explained Miltich.

"My hope is by helping to recognize these contributions, I can help reduce stigma surrounding mental illness and bring greater awareness to the general public about this issue," said Miltich.

In turn, he hopes to inspire advocacy for services for people with mental illness, as well as to encourage individuals living with mental illness to "know that recovery is possible, even if it may feel it isn't."

"Not only can you have recovery in your life, but you can thrive, in spite of the challenges a major mental illness poses," said Miltich. "The ultimate goal [of the program] is to help bring recovery to those who suffer."

Each performance, according to Miltich, will incorporate both a musical component as well as a narrative, the former focused on the music of Thelonious Monk as well as Miltich's own compositions, "many of which have been written in a style similar to some of Monk's."

"The narrative will highlight how I have used my art, as an improvising jazz musician, as a means towards my personal recovery," explained Miltich, who experienced his first psychotic break at the age of 22. He was eventually diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Already a working jazz musician at the time, Miltich connected with the music of jazz composer and pianist Thelonious Monk and has continued to use Monk's music as part of his recovery.

For Miltich, musical performance "has been a cathartic release," particularly during times of struggling with symptoms of mental illness.

"It's a chance to express all the joys, sorrows, and everything in between in life," said Miltich. "It provides me with a daily discipline, which to me is an important part of maintaining a stable balance in life."

When Miltich is performing, and improvising in particular, he said he seems to have no symptoms from schizophrenia.

"My belief is that my brain is so engaged and distracted by the task of playing music at a high level that I don't have room in my brain for the paranoid symptoms of schizophrenia," explained Miltich, just one of the many factors which drove him to performing in a more public forum.

A second contributor to his decision to share his story with a wider audience was personal experiences with stigma.

"It is such a terrible feeling to be discriminated against that I want to do everything I can to combat this so generations to come have less of that in their lives," explained Miltich. "Living with the illness is hard enough. People shouldn't have to contend with stigma and all the negative aspects it brings."

Miltich was also driven to the public eye after listening to a local presentation from Sue Abderholden from NAMI Minnesota.

According to Miltich, Abderholden shared "some very stark and sad realities that people with mental illness have faced in the past, and are facing now."

"When I heard statistics such as people with a major mental illness like schizophrenia on average live 15 to 20 years less than the general population, or when I heard that people with mental illness are more likely to be victims of violent crimes than commit them, I not only wanted to speak out, I felt a need to do so," explained Miltich. "These facts about people's lives with mental illness are unacceptable."

Miltich said he feels "an obligation to change" the injustices suffered by a population that he said, "for too many years has been ignored." He hopes to accomplish this feat by "putting a human story to an issue that so many people don't know about or understand."

“I have a unique position as someone who has a major mental illness, and as someone who has a public platform to speak from as a performing artist to really be of service to others,” continued Miltich. “I’m incredibly grateful for the opportunity to not only play music, but use my art as a tool for social justice. I hope that my story will help people to see that schizophrenia is not something to be feared.”

While also utilizing the opportunity as a public platform for advocating for mental health understanding and de-stigmatization, the tour also seeks to expand exposure to jazz in rural communities.

“I wanted to bring both high-level art, particularly jazz performance, and my message about mental health to rural regions of the state,” explained Miltich. “Art is in abundance in urban centers. However, I firmly believe people in rural areas are as deserving of high art as any other place, and that rural audiences are every bit as sophisticated and appreciative as urban ones.”

For Miltich, who has played rural venues for most of his life, this goal was driven by a personal understanding that “people in rural places are incredibly appreciative of art, as it is something that isn’t necessarily as available as other places.”

“People in rural areas deserve art, and care if they struggle with a major mental illness as much as anyone anywhere,” said Miltich.

For this project, which will launch in the summer of 2018 and continue into the spring of 2019, Miltich will tour with bassist Chris Bates, saxophonist Dave Karr, and drummer Nathan Norman who are some of the most active and high caliber jazz musicians currently working in the state of Minnesota.

Partners and performance locations have been announced and include: Cook, Minn., Northwoods Friends of the Arts; International Falls, Minn., Northland Counseling Center and Backus Community Center; Bemidji, Minn., Upper Mississippi Mental Health Center and Rail River Folk School; Northfield, Minn., Rice County Mental Health Collective and Northfield Union of Youth as well as Hot Spot Music; and Alexandria, Minn., and Evansville, Minn., Vikingland Community Support Center and Evansville Arts Council. Specific dates and times will be announced in the future.

“I simply believe that speaking out helps others with the illness and their families because they can know they’re not alone. Help is available, and recovery is around the corner,” said Miltich. “I know this is true because every time I have spoken, people have told me how much it had helped them. I believe when you help others, you in turn help yourself. It is by giving of yourself that you receive peace and serenity in the long run.”

The grant received by Miltich was made possible primarily due to the Minnesota Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund established as part of the November 2008 clean water, land, and legacy

amendment to the Minnesota Constitution. Funds are administered by the Minnesota State Arts Board whose mission “is to stimulate and encourage the creation, performance, and appreciation of the arts in the state.” The Arts Tour program is specifically aimed at connecting high caliber artists and artistic works with audiences outside the artist’s home region. The program also encourages education and outreach activities that cultivate broader or deeper connections between artists and audiences.

For further information on Miltich’s presentation of “The Improvised Life: Exploring Intersections of Mental Health and Creativity through Jazz” visit <https://www.sammiltichmusic.com/theimprovisedlife>

**Submitted photo**