

Dick and Emil's blue heaven

Fifteen years of elegant jazz

By Chet Williamson

Now let us praise famous local men. Think of jazz in Worcester, and trumpeter Emil Haddad and pianist Dick Odgren musically come to mind.

At 75, Haddad is the bigtown's jazz patriarch. At 50, Odgren is a father of two who has raised a family playing jazz piano. Add up the time they have dedicated to the local audience, and these brothers from different mothers have given nearly a century's worth of service to fostering the art.

As Steve Charboneau, jazz director at WICN-FM puts it: "Emil and Dick are jazz in Central New England - two individuals collectively dedicated and unselfishly willing to carry the musical torch."

Together as a duo since 1982, Haddad and Odgren ring out the old at 7 and 8 p.m. New Year's Eve, Wednesday, Dec. 31, as part of the First Night celebration at All Saints Episcopal Church, 10 Irving St. They also play at 9 p.m. every Saturday at O'Flaherty's Piano Bar, 1541 Main St.

Odgren tells the story of how when he and his brothers had a commercial trio together, on the breaks they would go out and "Emil," as they called it - meaning to go fraternize with the public. They all thought it was a "put-on," an obligatory part of show biz. A few years later, when Odgren began working with Haddad, he found out it wasn't an act. Haddad was and is genuine.

Sincerity and meaning are the hallmarks of the Haddad/Odgren duo. Known as the "Hugman" because of his warm and affectionate greetings, Haddad's playing is just as embracing. Although he still doubles on trumpet, the mellow-toned flugelhorn has become his

instrument of choice.

Echoes from other players blow through his horn - like Harry "Sweets" Edison, Clark Terry and Art Farmer - but long ago, Haddad shed the coat of influence. For old-school jazzers, developing your own sound was paramount. Tone and melodic content were to be personal statements. Haddad's sound is a reflection of the man; it surrounds and envelops the listener with warmth and affection.

On ballads, he can sound wounded and bruised as a ripe plum. Yet he never wallows. On spirited swing numbers, he is crisp and tart as a fresh lime. Yet he will never blurt and blare with revelry. There is always a controlled sound of lyrical grace in his playing.

Haddad will give you a variety of different looks. He adds shape and color to his sound by the use of mutes, plungers and his trademark Crown Royal cloth bag. And he is not always properly recognized for his blues playing. For a while, he stayed in New York, where he played in the trumpet section of the orchestra of great bluesman Jay McShann. Like McShann, Haddad can riff and phrase the blues like a clear fall sky. He can also get the down-in-the-mouth growls of some lonesome alley cat.

Haddad's singing is also often overlooked. Not a big, fill-the-room instrument, his is a sit-down-next-to-you-and-converse vector. He has this cool way of phrasing that is somewhere between Billie Holiday and Jack Teagarden.



Emil Haddad and Dick Odgren at O'Flaherty's.

As a pianist, Odgren is the perfect foil for Haddad - an accompanist supreme yet a commanding soloist. And like Haddad, he is a lyrical player who carries the melody in his vest pocket. A schooled player who was both a student and in-

structor at Berklee College of Music, Odgren is an exceptional technician who never flaunts his prowess recklessly. Instead, he folds that expertise into the sections and measures of a song for balance and support.

Odgren came up in the '60s but was trained by players who reach further back. Duke Ellington, Fats Waller and Art Tatum lead to Bud Powell before linking up with Bill Evans, McCoy Tyner and Chick Corea. Shades of each giant cast long shadows in Odgren's playing, but the light of his own style shines brightly.

He is a modest player who doesn't rely on stock licks. Avoiding cliches, he delights in finding 'new and different ways to voice a chord. Still, much like Dave McKenna, Odgren also recognizes more traditional styles. Lately, his left hand has become a force to be reckoned with. He walks a bass line Ray Brown would be proud of. As fleet-fingered as his right hand can be, he will touch all bases before stepping squarely on home.

Odgren's best feature however, is the way he frames the music. Making Haddad sound good is his primary objective. The street department should take note of the way he paves harmony roads for Haddad's improvisational vehicles.

As a duo, Haddad and Odgren are a match made in jazz heaven. After 15 years of playing together, their interplay is both empathetic and telepathic. They play intimately as a confession. It is the sound of two into one. And two into one equals heaven.