

## Dave Koz and friends will bring in holiday spirit

By **DAVE LAVENDER**  
for The Herald-Dispatch

On any given night at the Cam Henderson Center, Los Angeles resident Rick Braun is a proud parent sitting with his wife Christiane cheering on the Thundering Herd and No. 3 — their son Kyle.

At 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 4, Kyle, a sophomore guard for Marshall's men's basketball team, gets to return the fan-in-the-stands favor as his dad takes center court, playing the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center as part of the Marshall Artists Series.

Profiled earlier this year in *Jazz Times* for his chart-topping 30th

year in the industry, Braun, a revered trumpeter, composer, producer and songwriter, is one of the all-star musicians heralding in the holidays as world-renowned saxophonist Dave Koz & Friends brings in its 25th Anniversary Christmas Show.

Koz will be joined by his friends, jazz music icons guitarist Peter White, vocalist Rebecca Jade, keyboardist Keiko Matsui, and Braun, an ace sideman who has recorded



BRAUN



KOZ

and toured with Tina Turner, Tom Petty, Rod Stewart, Sade, Natalie Cole and R&B Speedwagon before breaking out as a solo artist. Braun has also chalked up 20 No. 1 smooth jazz hits and hit-making collaborations with Boney James, as a member of RnR with saxophonist Richard Elliot, and BWB, a powerhouse trio with Kirk Whalum and Norman Brown.

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### IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** Hoops Children's Hospital at Cabell Huntington Hospital presents Dave Koz and Friends 25th Anniversary Christmas Tour as part of the 86th annual Marshall Artists Series

**WHERE:** Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, 925 4th Ave., Huntington

**WHEN:** 7:30 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 4

**HOW MUCH:** Tickets are \$98, \$87, \$76 and \$65.

**GET TICKETS:** Order at 304-696-6656 or ticketmaster.com. Tickets may also be purchased at The Marshall Artists Series Box Office in the Marshall Joan C. Edwards Playhouse on 5th Avenue. Box Office hours are noon to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday.

**SPONSORS:** Additional sponsors are City National Bank, Steptoe & Johnson, Dr. Jeff and Mrs. Brooke Leaberry, iHeart Radio, WSAZ and The Herald-Dispatch.

### SPIRIT

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Braun, who has also produced a string of No. 1 hits for other artists, said he's stoked to be back out with long-time friend Koz, a contemporary sax icon who's notched 11 No. 1 contemporary jazz albums, has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and collaborates with such influential pop acts as Vulfpeck.

"Being back together has brought us a renewed sense of purpose and a reminder how important it is to experience the fellowship and the energy and the joy of live performance with an audience," Braun said. "It was like all of the air going out of a balloon when the pandemic hit. Now we are filling that back up and it feels wonderful."

#### The Wizard of Koz! How it all began

Koz started what is now one of the longest-running, jazz-based Christmas tours back in 1997 as a simple six-city tour with David Benoit to celebrate the release of his first Christmas album, "December Makes Me Feel This Way." Now the tour visits 23 cities including Huntington for the 2022 holiday season. The tour debuts Koz's eighth holiday album — "Christmas Ballads (25th Anniversary Collection)" — live for the first time. Audiences can expect a collection of holiday favorites performed by the quintet along with 10 songs Koz has never recorded before. An inspiring mashup of John Lennon's "Happy Xmas (War Is

Over)" and "Imagine" features Rebecca Jade on vocals as well as "Wrapped Up in Your Smile" written by Koz and the album's producer Philippe Saisse.

Speaking by phone, while rehearsing in Nashville, Koz said he and Benoit started the tour in 1997 as a salve for their collective grief.

"It was totally by accident really," said Koz, who is Jewish. "... I always loved all the trappings of Christmas — all of the music and the trees and the family time and dinner when I would go to my friends' houses. In 1997, David Benoit and I had each lost a parent within a couple weeks of each other. We thought, 'Hey, let's go play some shows and deal with our emotions and inspire some people in the process.' We started with a half dozen shows that were sparsely attended, but they invited us back. We added Rick Braun and Peter White and we just started to grow from there, and here we are. Christmas is all about nostalgia and tradition and hearing the same songs and eating the same foods and it's all about family and friends and feeling warm and fuzzy inside, and we're able to bring that for a lot of people."

#### It's beginning to tour a lot like Christmas

These days, Koz, whose latest album popped four No. 1 songs on top of the contemporary jazz charts, leads this tour — which is pretty intense.

"I think this tour is 24 dates in 23 cities in 28 days, and it's always this way," Koz said. "It's one-nighters,

two buses, one semi-truck — and the truth is, you have to love the people you are on the road with. These are amazing people and musicians and incredible artists in their own right, but also dear friends. That makes up for a lot when you are able to share this with them. We are family on the road."

The tour starts in the east and winds its way through the U.S. heartlands before heading back west to the musicians' homes in California. Typically they hit many of the same cities, Koz said each year they try to add on a couple of fresh cities.

"It's been wonderful seeing people come way back in the beginning when they brought their kids and now those kids are bringing their kids, so we have kind of turned it into a family tradition. We always like to filter in some new cities and Huntington is one of those for us we have never been. When Rick said we should take the tour to Huntington where Kyle's going to school, we said why not. He guaranteed there will be lots of festive people in bright green outfits," Koz said with a laugh. "I've known Rick since before both of his kids were born, so Kyle is like another son to me. So this is a beautiful thing to come and see how he is doing."

The blue-collar-raised Braun, whose dad and one of his brothers worked at Bethlehem Steel in Allentown, Pennsylvania (the steel city etched into musical history by Billy Joel), said he sees that same steel-city resiliency in Huntington and Marshall.

Braun and his wife were

just at the Herd's 3rd Avenue basketball exhibition, and while he was conducting this interview — his wife and son — who by chance was born on Nov. 14 — were at the Marshall Memorial Fountain ceremony. The Brauns, whose daughter has autism, have also forged a strong bond with the Marshall Autism Center, with proceeds from his NYE show in Tucson, Arizona, going to the agency.

"We have stayed there many times and we just love coming there," Braun said. "We love the community and the fact that it's a steel town. There's just so many similarities between Huntington and Allentown. They're steel towns but have room for a lot of other things."

#### We are ... keeping the jazz flame alive

While the Christmas tour, and their regularly scheduled summer 2023 jazz cruises and tours are back on the books, Braun said his son Kyle, an international business major and graphic arts minor at Marshall, helped keep his spirits afloat and his music out there when the COVID-19 pandemic shut down 2020's tours.

Braun was on his way to Miami, Florida, ready to sail away on a sold-out jazz cruise, in winter of 2020, when the COVID concerns canceled the tour in mid-air. He returned to his California home and watched tour dates disappear one by one.

"I got home and a fan, Marilyn James, called me and she said, 'Rick, you should start an online

show,'" Braun said. "Kyle lost his senior year of high school and was stuck at home and Kyle and his friend Nicholas said we could put on a show so for 60-plus shows. We did Rick's Cafe Live, turning the living room into a performance area. Kyle was our graphic artist guy and ran the camera and he and Nicholas were vampires staying up all night doing some magical things with editing and Photoshop."

Fans tuned in from around the world. The Brauns invited in incredible musical guests, made them food, and paid them, really helping those musicians who rely solely on touring for income. Braun said the Cafe created some magical connections during unprecedented times.

"I really got to know my son so much better. I would have never got to spend that much time with him and it was a great experience," Braun said, "and the reach of it kind of blew our minds. I was in Germany after that in a village and someone shouted at me 'Rick Braun' — Rick's Cafe Live... Kyle did all 60 of our show posters and he's still making posters for me. On the scale of kids you could have, we really won the lottery with that kid."

#### Rekindling the flame of live music

While Braun was grateful for keeping a digital connection to fans, he and Koz said nothing beats sharing Christmas live on stage with friends. On this tour, they come visiting bearing new gifts. Koz and Friends released "Christmas Ballads (25th Anniver-

sary Collection)" in September. Koz, and album producer and arranger Philippe Saisse, co-wrote an original, "Wrapped Up in Your Smile," then hand-picked nine more songs exploring the romantic side of the season.

Saisse, who is French, picked "Petit Papa Noel" from the 1946 French film "Destins" — a song he grew up with — while Koz's soprano sax lovingly echoes the tender tones of Karen Carpenter's voice on "Merry Christmas Durling."

"We wanted to make an album of ballads for that time of the night, after the big party, when you've put away the dishes and the guests are gone and it's a romantic time in front of the fireplace with a beverage and with the one you love," Koz said.

Five of the tracks are sacred hymns, starting with Saisse's uniquely arranged medley of "Away in a Manger/Silent Night" and continuing on through "Greensleeves" (presented for the season as "What Child is This?"), an effortless blend of "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen/My Favorite Things," Schubert's "Ave Maria" and "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear."

"These are songs that have so much meat on them, they open themselves to all kinds of different possibilities," Koz said. "... Songs with that kind of latitude allow you to be creative and to take on who you are as a musician, but it is a fine line. You can't go overboard. You have to remain dedicated and respectful to the music and also to your style, which is a winning formula."