

Mon & Tue
APR 21 & 22
7:30 pm

Pavilion

Sullivan Fortner

solo piano

Just Friends Jazz Series



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We are pleased to partner with the Lied Center of Kansas to present the *Just Friends Jazz Series*.

There will be no intermission during this performance.

For more than a decade, Sullivan Fortner has been stretching deep-rooted talents as a pianist, composer, bandleader and uncompromising individualist. The Grammy Award-winning artist and educator out of New Orleans received international praise as both key player and producer for his collaborative work on *The Window*, alongside Cécile McLorin Salvant, and earned a 2023 Grammy nomination for his provocative arrangement of "Optimistic Voices/No Love Dying" from Cécile's 2022 release *Ghost Song*.

In addition to his celebrated releases as a co-leader and collaborator, as a solo leader he has issued several releases to effusive critical acclaim, including *Aria* (2015), *Moments Preserved* (2018) and *Solo Game* (2024), which received 4-star reviews in *DownBeat* and France's *Telerama Magazine*. His 2025 release, *Southern Nights*, features Peter Washington and Marcus Gilmore.

Fortner is "one of the best pianists in the world today, and he has all of the musical attributes I love: creativity, technique always in the service of expression, joy and humor, fearlessness and pianistic mastery," says album producer and Grammy-nominated artist Fred Hersch.

Winner of the 2024 *DownBeat* Critics Poll for Rising Star Jazz Group: Sullivan Fortner Trio, the prolific artist soon earned the Western Jazz Presenters Grant, empowering him to lead his trio—which features Tyrone Allen and Kayvon Gordon—on a coastal tour of the U.S. through Albuquerque, NM; Portland, OR; and Oakland and Monterey, CA. Over the past decade, he has enjoyed creative

associations with such diverse voices as Wynton Marsalis, Paul Simon, Diane Reeves, Etienne Charles and John Scofield; his frequent and longtime collaborators have included Ambrose Akinmusire, Dee Dee Bridgewater, Stefon Harris, Kassa Overall, Tivon Pennicott, Peter Bernstein, Nicholas Payton, Billy Hart, Gary Bartz, Chief Adjuah, Fred Hersch and the late Roy Hargrove. Recent collaborations include Grammy-nominated releases *Dear Love* and *Generations* from leaders Jazzmeia Horn and The Baylor Project, respectively.

Playing solo or leading an orchestra, Fortner engages harmony and rhythmic ideas through curiosity and clarity. Within phrases, he finds universes, and listeners often hear how he's moved by each note he explores. Coming up in New Orleans, he began playing piano at age 7, following a storied lineage of improvisers, masters of time and every iteration of the blues. He earned his Bachelor of Music from Oberlin Conservatory and Master of Music in jazz performance from Manhattan School of Music (MSM). A champion of mentorship, Fortner has offered masterclasses at MSM, New Orleans Center for Creative Arts (NOCCA), Purdue University, Lafayette Summer Music Workshop, Belmont University and Oberlin Conservatory, where he held a faculty position. In spring 2023, he again returned to his undergraduate alma mater as visiting professor of jazz piano.

A highly sought-after improviser, Fortner has performed across the country and throughout the world at such cultural institutions as Snug Harbor, New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts, Sweet Lorraine's and The Jazz Playhouse in New Orleans, as well as Jazz at Lincoln Center, Jazz Standard and Smalls Jazz Club in New York City. He's appeared at celebrated festivals, including Newport, Monterey, Discover, Tri-C and Gillmore Keyboard, among others. In 2019, Fortner brought his band to the historic Village Vanguard for a week-long engagement he would reprise in 2020 as a virtual performance during the pandemic. His notable studio contributions include work on Etienne Charles's *Kaiso* (Culture Shock, 2011), Donald Harrison's *Quantum Leap* (FOMP, 2010) and Theo Croker's *The Fundamentals* (Left Sided Music, 2007).

Pulling distinct elements from different eras, Fortner's artistry preserves the tradition and evolves the sound. He seeks connections among different musical styles that are at once deeply soulful and wildly inventive. Both his works and his insights have been featured in culture drivers from *The New York Times* to *The Root*. Further accolades include the 2015 Cole Porter Fellowship awarded by the American Pianists Association, Leonore Annenberg Arts Fellowship, the 2016 Lincoln Center Award for Emerging Artists and, in 2020, the prestigious Shifting Foundation Grant for artistic career development.

"Fortner displays an ease of expression that stems from a longtime commitment to the music." – *DownBeat*

"His fundamentals as a player could hardly be stronger, and his instincts as a composer and bandleader are almost startlingly mature." – *The New York Times*

"He is a spiritually thematic soul, alone in the studio he plays his concerns into the music. What we hear is a musician seeking safety in the studio, using every tool nearby to create a forcefield protecting him from a threatening environment and in this chamber, we hear a world emerge." – Jason Moran

"Fortner beautifully, slowly and deliberately asks the eternal question of the essence of love—his notes dance, come to a halt and resume the twirls." – *OffBeat Magazine*