

The Motown Sound

Hey listen up. Hear that sound? Fort Street has a new beat.

Take a stroll down the bustling campus streets one afternoon and you are likely to discover something that will give you pause: the rich, rhythmic tones of a man and his keyboard. Stop for a listen and you will be rewarded with a ceaseless stream of sound as one melody melts into another, courtesy of the maverick musician Stewart Cunningham.

A product of the Detroit Straight-ahead jazz scene—which includes the likes of Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Herbie Hancock—this Motor City native is no stranger to playing on the go. From Canada to New York to Las Angeles—and several cities in between, his latest move has been extreme west, where he has set up shop on Oahu. “I came out here to see it, then I just started playing,” says Cunningham of his migration to the Land of Aloha, though he credits the natural harmony of the island in helping him kick a long-term habit of substance abuse.

With a musical pedigree of nearly 30 years of piano and vocal training, in addition to trumpet work beginning in grade 3 at a Catholic military school, the guy knows how to carry a beat, which earned him a walk-on role as piano man for Duc’s Bistro on 1188 Maunakea Street in downtown. He continued to move about Honolulu, playing at Sorrento’s, the Bistro in Century Center and the Plaza Club—all located within Honolulu.

When asked about his choice of instrument, Cunningham replied, “Piano represents family, people gathered around. And you step into any club and it has one, it’s automatic.” As for his latest gig outside Govindaji’s Vegetarian Cuisine, he says, “I was between regular gigs, saw some chairs and thought some music would be great,” which he followed with, “This place [Fort Street] is great, you get to see and meet so many great people.” And the pedestrians have taken a liking to the latest Fort Street soundtrack, as evidenced by his jam-packed tip cup and numerous photo ops throughout the day, though the man behind the music is unknown to most who pass by. “I’ve heard his music but he is kind of mysterious. It would be cool to know more about him,” says broadcast journalism junior Ruthie Leigh.

He enjoys the energy and fresh air of an outside playing environment, which he first experienced while playing trumpet on the corner of Hotel and Bishop. He cites the Honolulu Police Department’s love of the arts as cause for his continued composition on Fort Street. Though levels of enthusiasm for the jazzy man vary across the downtown campus, as affirmed by communications student Miriam L. who said, “I bet he is just there to watch pretty girls walk by.” Talk about a tough crowd.

Offering a mix of the Beatles, Ray Charles and Sinatra—in addition to his own pieces, the “Lunchtime Jazz Piano” show is surely music to your ears. And in the fashion of a true artist, Cunningham is not content with a standard routine. His latest addition, vocalist Joni Fujii, can be found keeping things fresh with the pianist on a weekly basis. In addition, they’ve got a running first Friday engagement at Floterior on 1129 Bethel Street in Chinatown, where Stewart swaps the keyboard for a baby grand. And do keep your ears perked, because the entertainer plans to offer Fort Street a taste of the trumpet, which he feels is a requirement for the holidays; a celebration of music perhaps?