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'Music is medicine' : New downtown Frederick mural honors jazz legend and native son

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Artist Rafael Blanco is shown in front of his mural depicting Frederick-born jazz innovator Lester Bowie on a building on South Market Street in Frederick.

Staff photo by Graham Cullen

From atop a construction boom lift, artist Rafael Blanco was hard at work painting downtown Frederick's latest public mural last week when a voice from below exclaimed, "that's Lester Bowie!"

For days onlookers watched as Blanco toiled away, meticulously adding detail to the facade of a three-story building overlooking Carroll Creek at 69 S. Market St. But that was the first time someone identified the man in the image.

Barry Kissin, a retired attorney and jazz enthusiast, was the onlooker who immediately recognized the late Bowie, a Frederick native and internationally acclaimed jazz trumpeter — and that was before Blanco had even painted the trumpet.



A mural of Frederick-born jazz innovator Lester Bowie adorns the prominently positioned facade of a building along Carroll Creek on South Market Street in Frederick. In three years another muralist will be given the opportunity to replace the public work of art, with the spot rotating art indefinitely, thanks to funding from the Ausherman Family Foundation.

Staff photo by Graham Cullen

Over the course of six days last week, Blanco worked to complete the project — named the “Lester Bowie Mural” — which was commissioned by the Frederick Arts Council. The piece is set for an official unveiling celebration Saturday, complete with performances by the Eric Byrd quartet and a trumpet-led quartet from D.C.

Homage to a jazz legend

The mural, inspired by a photograph of the acclaimed jazz musician performing in San Francisco in 1976 by photographer Tomas Copi, depicts Bowie in black and white, performing on the trumpet and donning his signature look — a white lab coat and surgical mask — against a background of abstract color.



The mural of Frederick-born jazz innovator Lester Bowie, painted by Aurora, Illinois-based artist Rafael Blanco looks out over Carroll Creek in downtown Frederick.

Staff photo by Graham Cullen

Bowie's younger brother, Joseph, who now lives in the Netherlands and is a jazz musician in his own right, said Lester saw his role in music as that of a researcher conducting experiments.

"Lester looked at music like a science," the younger Bowie said. "He considered himself more of a scientist or a doctor of music, because it was his opinion that music is medicine; is the healing force of the universe."

With 12 years separating the two, Joseph said his brother was his mentor growing up and "probably is the reason I'm a musician today," he said.

During a video call Monday he added that he has memories of being 4 or 5 years old, sitting under the family's grand piano while Lester and his bands would rehearse. "And I would be amazed, just watching, listening to this music."



A detailed look at part of the mural.

Staff photo by Graham Cullen

Lester Bowie, who according to an obituary in the New York Times in 1999, died at his Brooklyn, New York home of liver cancer at 58. The piece described Bowie as an icon of the experimental jazz movement who performed and recorded for more than 30 years after serving in the U.S. Army with the military police.

Among his myriad of accomplishments, Bowie was featured on several tracks of pop music legend David Bowie's (no relation) album *Black Tie White Noise*, with the track "Looking for Lester" being about him.

According to his younger brother, Bowie eschewed genres and was featured on the theme song for the eighth and final season of "The Cosby Show," with his trumpet punctuating throughout the iconic tune.

Contemporary, yet historic

None of Bowie's history, however, was known to Blanco when he initially answered a call for proposals in September, one of perhaps a thousand such applications he's sent off over the course of his career.

In fact, the idea of featuring Bowie in the design wasn't even among the two or three proposals he originally submitted. It was after the search committee saw a mural Blanco painted in Roseville, California, of famed Depression-era photographer Dorothea Lange that their interest was piqued. Committee members suggested

Blanco rework his proposal to incorporate either Bowie or Patsy Cline, a renowned vocalist who also hailed from Frederick.

But in doing his research, something about Bowie struck a chord with Blanco.

The mask Bowie had draped around his neck in the photograph, which at the time could've been seen as the eccentricity of a musician striving to break musical boundaries, takes on a new meaning in the era of COVID-19.

"I saw the mask and I'm like, 'well, what an amazing time for it, because it's contemporary, but yet, it's historic,'" he said.

Charlotte Marra, the manager of public art for the Frederick Arts Council, said the selection committee was captivated by Blanco's proposal, for which she said he did extensive research.

The criteria for the proposed mural initially sought out a work that would be uplifting and empowering.

"We did feel that this image did fit our requirements quite well," she said. "We love the fact that he was from Frederick. We wanted to celebrate diversity, we wanted to celebrate a talented musician who was born in Frederick."

Eye-catching display

In such a prominent spot along a downtown thoroughfare, the mural is already turning heads.

At 17 feet wide and 20 feet tall, it spans the second and third stories of the vacant building — which most recently housed a Subway sandwich shop that closed more than a year ago — and has an arresting quality to it.



Artist Rafael Blanco works to paint a mural depicting Frederick-born jazz innovator Lester Bowie on a building on South Market Street in Frederick.

Staff photo by Graham Cullen



Artist Rafael Blanco raises a boom lift to access a section of a wall for his mural of Frederick-born jazz innovator Lester Bowie on a building on South Market Street in Frederick.

Staff photo by Graham Cullen

While Blanco, who lives in Aurora, Illinois, added detail to the photorealistic image, alternating between both broad and fine brush strokes, passersby stopped in their tracks— some snapping pictures on their phone and others offering a simple, “wow” as he worked.

“Once you hear that ‘wow,’ it means that it’s working,” he said. “It means that it’s brightening their day somehow.”

Despite the added pressure of painting with an audience, Blanco said he’s all too happy to have people watch as the mural evolves because it’s a moment that will stay with them.

“So every time that they pass through here in the future, they’re always going to remember ‘I saw that guy painting that part of the trumpet or painting that hand,’” he said. “And that makes it much more special. That makes it almost everlasting, because it’s not just on the wall – it’s also going to be part of their lives.”



Rafael Blanco is photographed by his wife, Yascara Romero Tuesday morning in front of his completed mural, which overlooks Carroll Creek and South Market Street in Frederick.

Staff photo by Graham Cullen

But as with all public art, there is an impermanence inherent to the work.

With a protective clear coat over the many layers of paint Blanco spent days applying, it's not the rain, heat or cold that will undo the work.

Another aspect of the project is that the wall on which the mural is painted will be painted over in three years in favor of a new design— a sort of fresh canvass for an artist not yet selected, a design likely not yet even dreamed up.

The Aushman Family Foundation, which has helped fund other nearby public works, offered up the Market Street facade and provided \$15,000 to seed the project, said Leigh Adams, the executive director of the foundation.

The rotating nature of the mural site allows the work to be responsive to a given time period in Frederick and better reflect the community, Adams said.



Artist Rafael Blanco holds his 3-year-old son Teo Lopez de San Roman Tuesday morning as he shows his completed mural to his step-daughter Aylen Renteria and wife Yascara Romero, shown at far right. Teo, Blanco said, was disappointed the mural didn't include trains.
Staff photo by Graham Cullen

The inclusion of Bowie's trademark clothing, complete with a face mask draped around his neck, is a perfect example.

"The idea of rotating that mural out every couple years is that ... in three years, maybe the landscape is going to look differently ... post-COVID," she said.



Artist Rafael Blanco stands atop a boom lift as he works to paint a mural depicting Frederick-born jazz innovator Lester Bowie on a building on South Market Street in Frederick.

Staff photo by Graham Cullen

While the clock may already be ticking, Blanco said he's not bothered by the ephemeral nature of the project.

"For me what [the mural] signifies is not only just paying homage to Lester Bowie, but what it could represent, or what it could influence for someone like a kid," he said.

With its black and white image of Bowie trumpeting toward the setting sun in the west; and with a veritable cacophony of vibrantly colored abstract patterns symbolizing his music as its background, the mural follows in a series of recently completed pieces of public art.

Fighting back tears, Kissin, who actually got to jam with Bowie during one of his many trips back to Frederick, described why the piece resonates with him.

"To have that in such a prominent place in such a beautiful mural in the middle of Frederick is, it's very moving to me," he said.

If You Go

What: An unveiling celebration for Rafael Blanco's mural "Lester Bowie Mural" featuring Frederick jazz legend Lester Bowie

When: 1 to 5 p.m., Saturday, Dec. 5

Where: 69 S. Market St., Frederick

Details: Members of the public are invited to celebrate the official unveiling of the "Lester Bowie Mural" — entirely outdoors — with a ceremony that will include the Eric Byrd quartet and a trumpet-led quartet from D.C., booked by Frederick Jazz Festival. The trumpet player is retired from one of the U.S. Marine bands. Beverly Bowie from AARCH — Lester Bowie's cousin — will also speak.

“We love the fact that he was from Frederick. We wanted to celebrate diversity, we wanted to celebrate a talented musician who was born in Frederick.”

- Charlotte Marra, the manager of public art for the Frederick Arts Council, on Frederick-born jazz legend Lester Bowie, the subject of the newest public mural downtown.

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