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**JAZZ ON JUNETEENTH AT KEYSTONE KORNER**

By

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On June 19, 2025, Brent Birckhead brought a group he calls “Exchange” to Keystone Korner as part of a series of performances that will culminate in an album. The players in the group vary to some extent from performance to performance, but the spirit of the group does not. Great energy, drive, and power, led by Birckhead’s constant movement, dancing as he plays.

I love this group. The music gets into my body. It is impossible to stay still, even as I take still photographs. People in the audience are bopping in their seats. They don’t dance only because Keystone Korner is a sit and listen kind of place.

The percussion is powerful in this group, a constant conversation between drums and congas. The rhythm fills the room.

The other musicians, too, are in constant conversation. Remarkable players who have much to say, they include:

**Brent Birckhead** on saxophones and flutes—the driving force.

**Jose Andre Montano**, a blind pianist who hears and responds to the other players with remarkable clarity, accompanying them with defining harmonies

**Brandon Woody** on trumpet, whose excellence was recently recognized with a Blue Note contract

**Imani-Grace Cooper**, whose voice is an instrument of great range and precision, adding an energetic dimension to the ensemble work

**Romeir Mendez** on bass, a constant force holding the group together

**Devron Dennis** on drums, backing the group with keen attention to what they are playing and in constant conversation, as I’ve said, with

**Themba Mkhathwa**, a percussionist who drives the rhythms on and on throughout the set.

The conversation among the musicians is one meaning of “exchange.” But Birckhead told me that he chose that term also because of the interaction between the players and the audience and because the music is an amalgam of styles—jazz, rock, Latin, African, and more—and because of the diversity of the musicians in ethnicity, culture, and style and because the music is also a conversation between past and present.

Much of the music on this night celebrates Juneteenth, freedom and hope. Songs of freedom include:

- “Some Day We’ll All Be Free” by Donny Hathaway but done very much in Birckhead’s style. Driving rhythm and tight harmonies.
- “Lift Every Voice” the Black national anthem but also in Birckhead’s style. “Dance if you want,” he said.

“Optimistic” by Birckhead, is intended, he told me, to express hope for the future change. Powerful, driving rhythm typical of Birckhead with a stunning show of vocal dexterity by Imani-Grace Cooper, wearing a sexy red gown and a winning smile.

Also particularly notable was another Birckhead original called “Jacaranda”, which is a celebration of his African roots and his travel there. It features the underlying sound of African drums and a duet of drums and percussion that was hard to believe it was so good.

All-in-all a wonderful evening of extraordinary, original music on an important day in American history. And I’m happy to say they will be back.

(Michael Friedman is a retired social worker who has become a jazz photographer in his old age. He is the house photographer for Keystone Korner. [Michael Friedman Photo Exhibit — Keystone Korner Baltimore](#))

Photos: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/NJF3qtLHmWB2ihMA7>