



KIND OF BLUE *Clockwise from left:* Will Barton in his North Park garage studio; his most popular painting, of pianist Bill Evans; “Blue Monk” illustrates his take on Reid Miles’ bold, two-toned style.



That Old Feeling

With his own riff on Blue Note, S.D.’s Will Barton creates a new standard | By Troy Johnson | Photography by Ryan Allan |

Fans who attended the last Kenny Burrell concert in San Diego may recognize Will Barton. He was the guy who brought the autograph session to a halt by presenting the jazz legend with his painting of the 1956 album, *Introducing Kenny Burrell*. “He asked if he could take a picture of it,” Barton explains, pulling the autographed painting off the wall of his music room, lined with vinyl records. “Then he asked me to make him one.”

This wouldn’t have happened a decade ago. Back then, Barton was a mortgage broker, flipping San Diego fixer-uppers for a good profit. At the time he was married to successful S.D. artist, Marie Najera. Before one of her shows, she handed him a throwaway canvas and the self-described jazz geek “decided to doodle,” inspired by the cover of Miles Davis’ album *Sketches of Spain*. He doodled a few more and Najera hung them at her show, unaware she was kick-starting his new career.

“It’s really not that good,” he says, pulling it from a stack. It is a thin silhouette of Miles, back arched and trumpet blaring, in an abyss of cracked red paint—stark, enigmatic and, yes, very good. “But I sold enough paintings at that first show to buy new surfboards for me and my kid.”

This is what he does now. He paints religiously, surfs religiously. Repeats. The small garage in Barton’s North Park home is part bro storage/

part nostalgic studio. Three well-used surfboards hang from the rafters. Buckets of brushes sit atop a beautiful and broken 1950s stove. In a corner lay various jazz musicians—Chet Baker, Hank Mobley, Dizzy Gillespie, Coltrane, Monk—painted on weathered particle boards.

Jazz fans are drawn to Barton’s work like they were to his inspiration—Reid Miles, the legendary graphic designer behind the jazz albums on Blue Note Records. Earth, Wind & Fire drummer Ralph Johnson has a Barton. The grandson of late jazz trumpeter Clifford Brown has commissioned a memorial piece. Dizzy’s jazz club Downtown shows his work. And Little Italy’s mod design showroom Mixture sells his art, most recently a Chet Baker triptych that now hangs in a Jonathan Segal-designed manse in Bird Rock.

“Will’s one of our most popular artists,” says Mixture co-owner Charles Taylor. “He riffs on the old Blue Note album covers, but if it was a ripoff, I wouldn’t hang it here. He does it in an abstract way; it’s like this is the evolution of jazz posters.”

“You didn’t even have to listen to the music,” Barton says. “You could just look at them and know it was jazz.” ■

For more information, please visit www.willbartonpaintings.com.