

## NITELIFE GUIDE

# Jazz composer expands creations, talents

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Record-Eagle staff writer

With his international career firmly entrenched, Bob James could live anywhere in the world.

But Traverse City is where the jazz pianist and composer feels a creative vibe.

"We like privacy, peace and quiet," said James, who has vacationed in the area for more than 20 years. "I think there's a feeling we get here, there's an escape aspect to it."

Since purchasing part of the Long Lake retreat estate of meat company magnate J. Ogden Armour in 1982, James and his wife, Judy, have been gradually renovating it to their satisfaction. Now the spread seven miles southwest of Traverse City — originally just out-buildings and a garden — has evolved to the point that they call it their permanent home.

"More and more it's becoming the kind of place we can't stand to be away from," said James, 64.

One of the world's best-known composers of "smooth" jazz, James has enjoyed an illustrious career highlighted by more than 30 albums, the hit

theme to the '70s television show "Taxi," two Grammys and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Smooth Jazz Association of America, and several Gold Records.

These days he spends about half his time performing in the U.S., Europe and Asia, and the other half recording in various settings. Never one to focus on a single project when he could be working on three or four, he laid down tracks for a new album with his jazz super-group Fourplay in February, the same month he released another with his Bob James Trio.

His latest solo recording, featuring guests including Dave Koz on saxophone and Chuck Loeb on guitar, debuted in 2002.

In an effort to communicate on a different creative level, James also is a visual artist whose digital works have been featured in shows, on album covers and on his Web site, where his iris-giclee prints sell for up to \$2,400.

While he's now ambivalent about his decision to go public with his art — "I'm not even sure that I didn't create a monster for

myself," he says — it did inspire his latest venture, The Bob James Art of Wine Collection. Launched in 2002 after a chance meeting with Australian beverage entrepreneur Chris Payne, the signature collection features James' distinctive art on its labels.

So far the collection consists of three wines from Down Under, including "Smooth Chardonnay," winner of a silver medal at the first U.S. Starwine International Wine Competition in Philadelphia in March. But James said the boutique label plans to add vintages from New Zealand and Italy soon and will eventually encompass wines from all over the world — including, he's hoping, one or two from northern Michigan.

For James, who personally tastes and approves each wine in the collection and showcases them at his concerts, the project is as hands-on as any he's been involved with.

"I'm in the middle of it, for better or worse," he said.

Wholeheartedly is how James also approaches his "other" current project, East Meets West.

Inspired by a visit to the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, where he improvised with students of traditional Chinese instruments in what he calls "the complete ultimate test of the universal language," the project came together in February. That's when James and five of the musicians gathered at the People's Radio Station Recording Studio to record several of his original compositions.

The result is a hybrid Chinese jazz that blends James' trademark piano with exotic instruments like



Record-Eagle/John L. Russell

**Jazz composer Bob James plays in his Long Lake studio where he is currently working on "East Meets West."**

the pipa, a four-stringed pear-shaped lute, and the erhu, a two-stringed bowed instrument.

James hopes the unusual sound will move audiences not only in the U.S. and China, but in Japan, where there's already an interest in Chinese music.

"I'm more excited about this than I've been about anything in the last 10 years," he said. "I'm hoping that it will grow naturally, that in making music that my ears love, that they will respond to it the way I have."

With or without the project's success, however, James' career shows no signs of winding down, thanks in part to a loyal jazz audience that is less fickle than its pop counterpart. If anything, James said, he's gotten more and better opportunities to perform in

recent years.

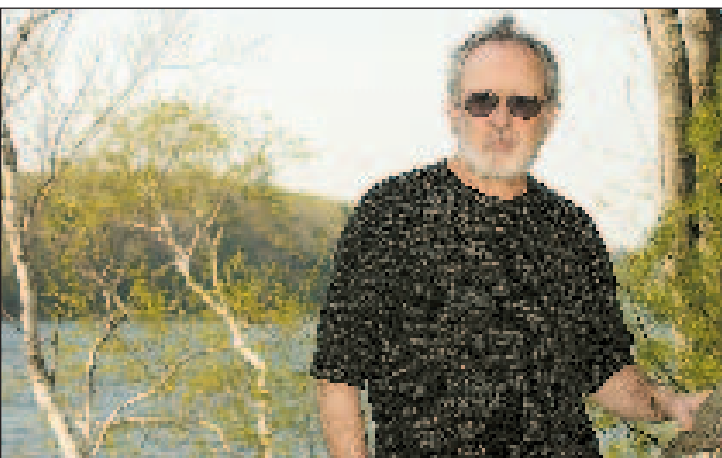
"One possible benefit of old age is you've gotten more exposure, a chance to build up loyalty," he said. "I've had a good career. I love what I do, I'm comfortable with the opportunities

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Bob James will headline a benefit concert for the City Opera House Heritage Association's restoration project at 8 p.m. June 11 in Corson Auditorium at Interlochen.

Restoration Recherche II also will feature smooth jazz saxophonist Kirk Whalum, jazz violinist Regina Carter and the Bob James Trio.

General admission tickets are \$42; patron tickets are \$250 and \$100 and include admission to special VIP events. For more information, call 941-8082.



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**Bob James and his wife, Judy, reside on Long Lake, where they are renovating their estate into a home.**