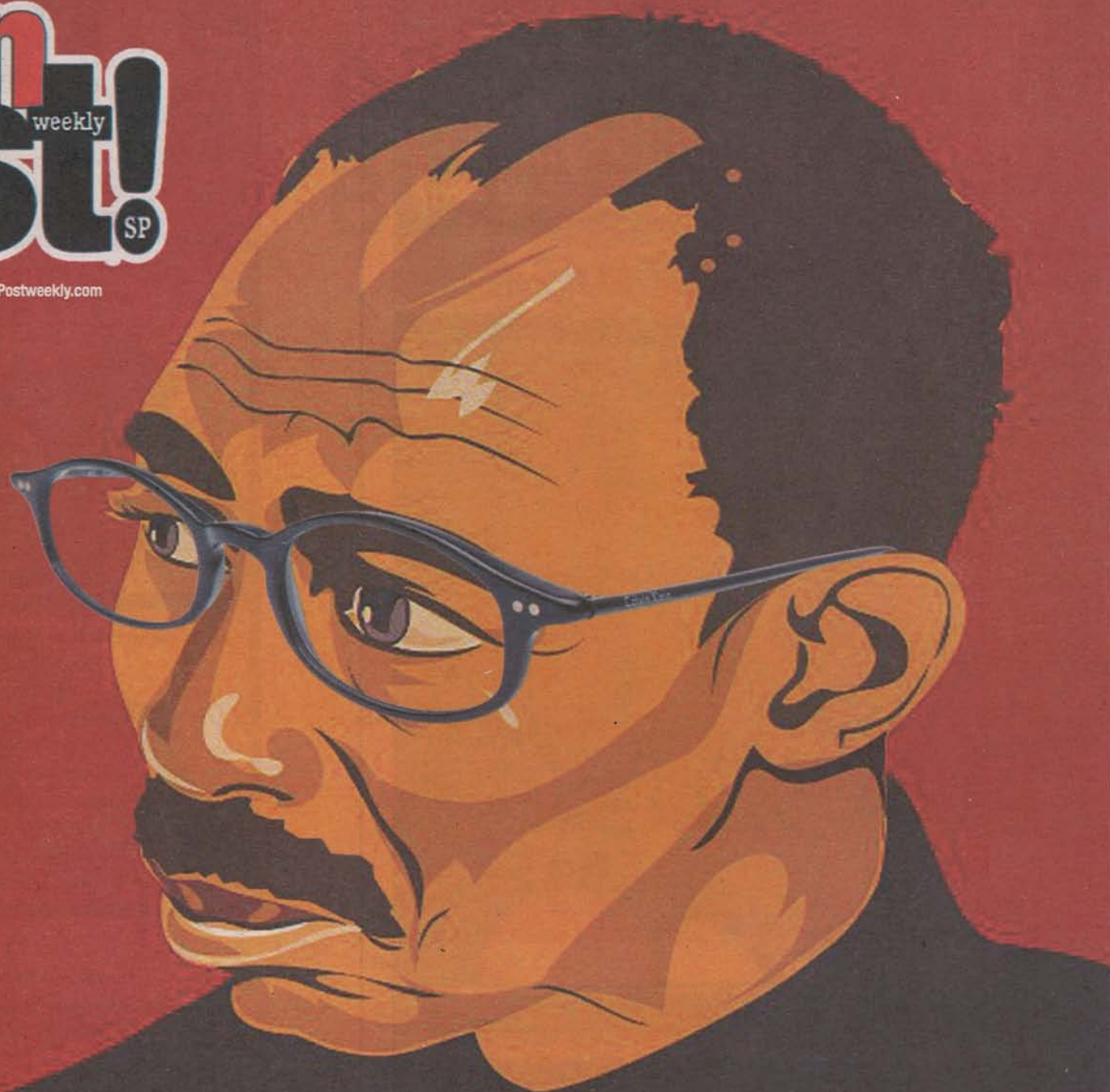


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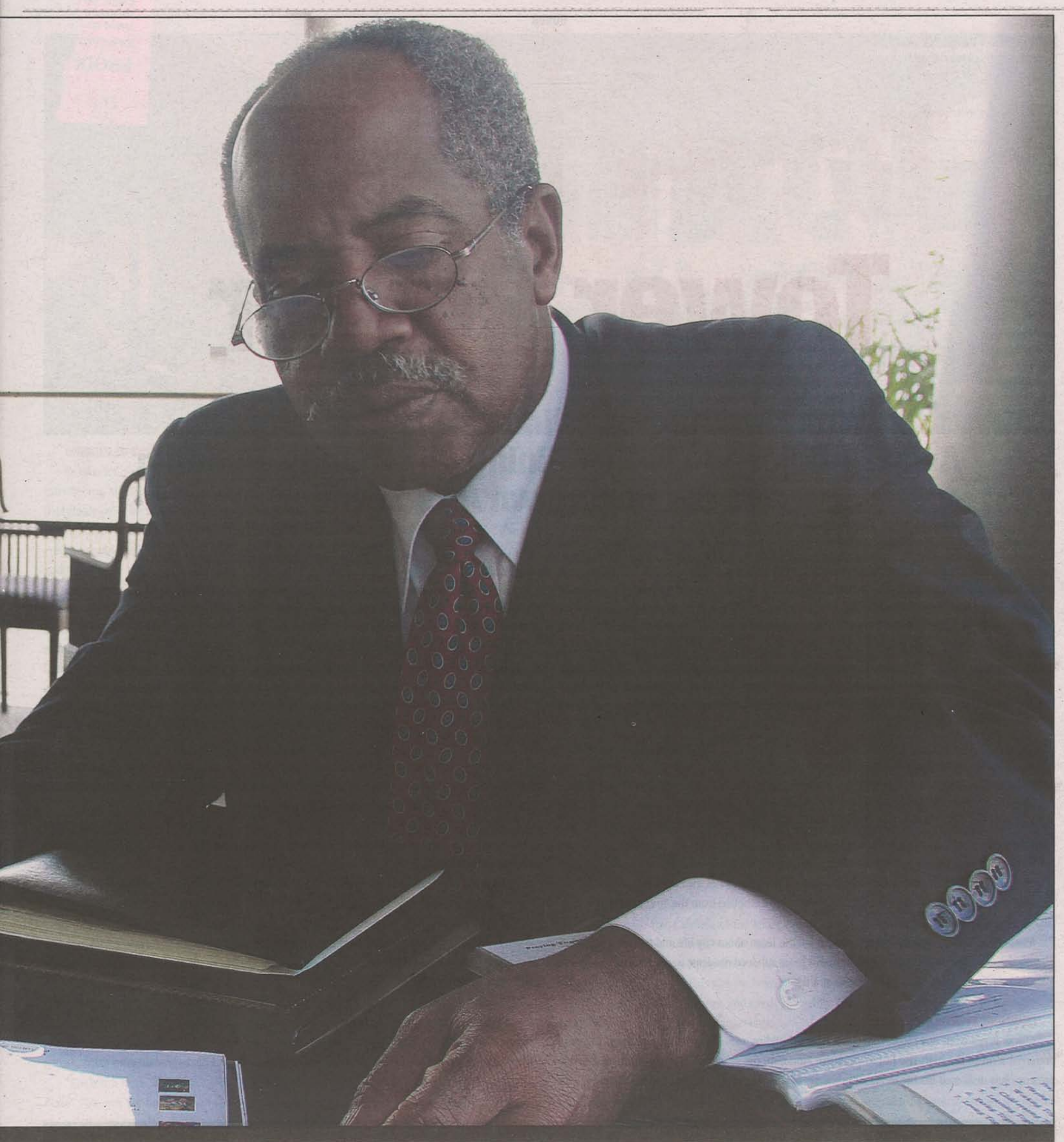
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With the Miami Skyline as His Backdrop, A Jazz Aficionado is Redefining Community-Building and the Downtown Arts Scene

By Antonella Skinner
Special to the SunPost

K NIGHT CENTER STATION," announces the digitized voice on Miami's Metromover.

This is my stop. The Knight Center, where thousands are enthralled by major international musical headliners, a testament to the city's investment in the arts.

Here, too, is the iconic Miami Tower, the downtown building lit up in different colors from night to night.

I have arrived at the Tower in search of a certain building concierge to educate me on the local jazz and cultural scene. Does this really make sense?

It does.

Particularly after what I experienced a few nights before: the sultry and melodic sounds of the incomparable Yvonne Brown and the Gary Thomas Trio, compliments of Keith Clarke, jazz connoisseur-humanitarian-office tower concierge.

By day, Clarke is a security employee for the high-rise's Sky Lobby, whose eleventh floor lounge and terrace frame beautiful, scenic views of the cityscape.

By night, once the building's tenants and visitors have emptied from the Tower and left it to its cleaning crew, he becomes much more.

As a new Miamian, this suburban mom has a lot to learn about city life and the intricacies that amplify the city's sound. As I discovered, one of its more subdued residents is, after hours, enhancing Miami's jazz scene, one artist and one event at a time.

LEARNING EVERYBODY'S NAME

Clarke is not what one might consider a typical building security guard, or concierge, as is the preferred term in the high-rise lingo. A native Floridian, the man with a joyous smile and gentle presence has dedicated his life to learning the art of social sciences. He embraces and evangelizes

on the "creative courage" in people.

"Keith Clarke is a multi-dimensional, gracious, unselfish man with a magical ability to embrace all aspects of society and use jazz as a medium to help build a sense of community and belonging," says Colleen Adams, founder of Empowered Youth, a non-profit organization assisting at-risk youth.

"Keith is a catalyst for many things," she continues. "He has exposed our young men to a life of potential by allowing them to sell their T-shirts at his jazz events and introducing them to affiliates of 'A Taste of the Grove' and whatever positive activity he can engage them in.

"The benefit has been multilateral. The young men meet professionals from all walks of life and can aspire to better their future in previously unimaginable ways. All of this because of Keith's compassion and conviction to help build up the community around him."

In an effort to build on that sense of congenial community where he works each day, Clarke began greeting Tower tenants by name, quite a task since about 2,000 people enter and exit the building everyday.

"After 9-11, I realized the importance of making the tenants feel at ease, of bringing humanity into our building community," Clarke relates. "So, I began to learn everybody's name."

And Tower tenants have noticed.

"Keith is one of the brightest people I've ever met," says Dr. Michael R. Ragan, a trial attorney. "He's able to triage the multitudes coming from all different directions, dialogue with and captivate them. In a week, he'll know your wife by name."

As I listened to Dr. Ragan describe Clarke, I was awe-struck by the keen regard Clarke leaves with those whom he encounters. Here was this attorney and one-time jazz musician describing Clarke as one of the "brightest people" he ever met. It was evident that there were many layers to Clarke. But as I began speaking with his colleagues and friends, I discovered an even greater story.



UNBRIDLED ENTHUSIASM

As founder and president of the Miami Jazz Society, Clarke has dedicated the past three years to introducing Miamians to the local talent brewing all around them. And he has done this at an irrefutable price for his audiences – free admission.

In addition to his monthly jazz night in the Tower's Sky Lounge, Clarke hosts a weekly Tuesday evening double-header film series showcasing movie-classics, old and new, in the building's 19th-floor auditorium.

Ragan adds that "Keith brings interesting music to an interesting venue. Venues for jazz in Miami are limited. But his knowledge, unbridled enthusiasm, and focus enable him to bring forth amazing unknown talent, as well as recognized artists."

"It is hard to put together these weekly and monthly events. Keith is an incredible person," Christine Hammatt, a Brickell resident for over forty years, extolls. "When I came to Miami, there were only 300,000 people living in this area. Now there is so much going on in the city."

"Keith manages to get a weekly audience at his film series because he shows quality films like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and documentaries like the one focused on women in jazz," Hammatt continues. "My fiancé and I have been attending for the past three years."

A LANGUAGE ALL CAN UNDERSTAND

Clarke's interest in the arts goes back to his youth. As a young adolescent, he philosophized with friends about faith and God's plan for creation. His interest in learning more about the human spirit led a teenaged Clarke to take a Greyhound bus cross-country to Monterey, Calif., to join his brother and sister-in-law.

The youngest of seven children and born on Easter Sunday, Clarke felt he had a special mission in life. His trip was the beginning of a life-long quest to fulfill his calling.

As a young saxophonist, Clarke tapped into his "creative courage" to found and participate in several jazz bands. But music was not his only love. Raised a Catholic, his interest in faith and mankind's communion with his creator continued to blossom. Clarke's interest in the "oneness of man" led his sister-in-law to introduce him to the Baha'i faith.

Appreciating the beauty of diversity in cultures – "taking and highlighting the common elements that allow us to be one" – Clarke realized the unifying power of music, a language all can relate to and understand.

Music as a unifier was evident in one of Clarke's recent jazz concerts.

"Keith is a force of nature," proclaims Tracy Fields, WLRN radio host of *Evenin' Jazz with Tracy Fields*. "He was the first person I interviewed on this show. I don't know how he does all he does,

but I know he does it out of the love in his heart."

When Clarke heard that Fields' recent health issues led to some financial struggles for her, he organized a fundraiser concert to benefit her.

Says Fields: "Keith uses what he has at his disposal and gets things done."

CONTINENTAL DRIFT

But all that insight, charity and experience did not happen overnight. In California, a young Clarke grew in wisdom as he networked and started his jazz bands. Eventually he discovered "there was no place like home."

So he packed his bags and returned to Miami, finishing high school at Miami Jackson High, then studying at Miami-Dade College. With his arts and psychology associate degrees in hand, the young activist commenced his travels across North America with the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus.

He traveled the continent for free, living off concession stand commissions, but the knowledge and experiences he obtained were priceless.

Traveling through major cities brought a greater understanding of the music, films, and talents that made these cities epicenters of culture. Clarke was not only intrigued by them but saved and documented his findings, much of which – music, photographs, and films – he shares at his events today.

After obtaining a bachelor of arts degree from California State University in 1983, he went to work for the Urban League. However, it was private security that led him back to his love for jazz when in 1986 he relocated to Atlanta.

POTLUCK AND IMPROV

Twenty years ago, Clarke and his Atlanta roommate, another Keith, decided to have a house-warming party. They invited a few friends and neighbors. Ultimately, 300 people showed up.

Musicians and music lovers from all walks of life showed up, bringing potluck dishes and their talent for improvisation. This was the beginning of the "Keith-and-Keith" yard parties.

The crowds demanded more, and small gatherings turned into quarterly events at cultural arts centers, churches, and any available venue.

"HEAVEN ON EARTH"

In 1998, Clarke returned to his roots in Miami through a contract with a private security firm. His "Keith-and-Keith" parties were so popular that he made several trips back to Atlanta during his

first five years in Miami to host the events he and his music partner had organized.

Then it came time to try to replicate that sense of community in his native hometown.

"Atlanta has such a vibrant community life, and I wanted to replicate that atmosphere of exquisite music and talent [in Miami] while celebrating the oneness in a diverse group of people," Clarke explains.

In 2001, he was hired as a concierge at the Miami Tower, the perfect location to take his love of the arts to the next level.

Here was where educated and professional people walked in and out, day after day; an iconic building with an impressive view, in the heart of Miami. What more could Clarke ask for?

He began to slowly work his magic.

He was invited, in 2005, to join the board of the Sunshine Jazz Organization, an opportunity which allowed him to gain a better feel for the local talent and the role he could play in this cultural melting pot.

Then, four years ago, Clarke met and heard vocalist Yvonne Brown. According to Clarke, he finally learned the sound of "heaven on earth" in the "crystal clear-as-a-bell voice, and disarming charm, of Miss Brown."

This was a new renaissance for Clarke, and he realized that the possibilities were endless.

"I adore him!" Brown effuses. "You have fans, and you have fans. Keith comes with lots of enthusiasm. He is so true and faithful to the jazz community because he knows the history. He feels it is a lost art and he is trying to keep it alive."

QUIET MAN, HUMBLE SMILE

Through Clarke, Brown was introduced to the Gary Thomas Trio, a perfect example of unknown talent mixing with more-experienced artists.

"Keith is not only giving us a work opportunity, but we are getting an opportunity to perform a more cutting edge style in a great venue," says Thomas, a recent University of Miami graduate. "He gives us artistic freedom. The generosity he puts forward is commendable. Keith doesn't get paid for most of what he does. He is selfless and dedicated to the art form."

"Keith is so true to the art form," affirms Brown. "I can't let him down. I always try to sing his favorite song, 'I Wish You Love'."

In 2009, Clarke formed the Miami Jazz Society and began recruiting UM students like Thomas and several known jazz trios and quartets to supply the sounds for his evening soirees.

Friends of Clarke contacted for this story employed the same themes when talking about him: love, graciousness, unselfish giving, community, and diversity. Who knew the quiet man with a humble smile directing those going through his Sky Lobby was so "multi-dimensional," as Empowered Youth's Adams describes him.

"IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE"

Don Colbert, a former A&R and Columbia Records music executive, once spent a Christmas with Clarke and his family.

"It all started with Keith needing a ride after one of his events, or so he said," Colbert recalls.

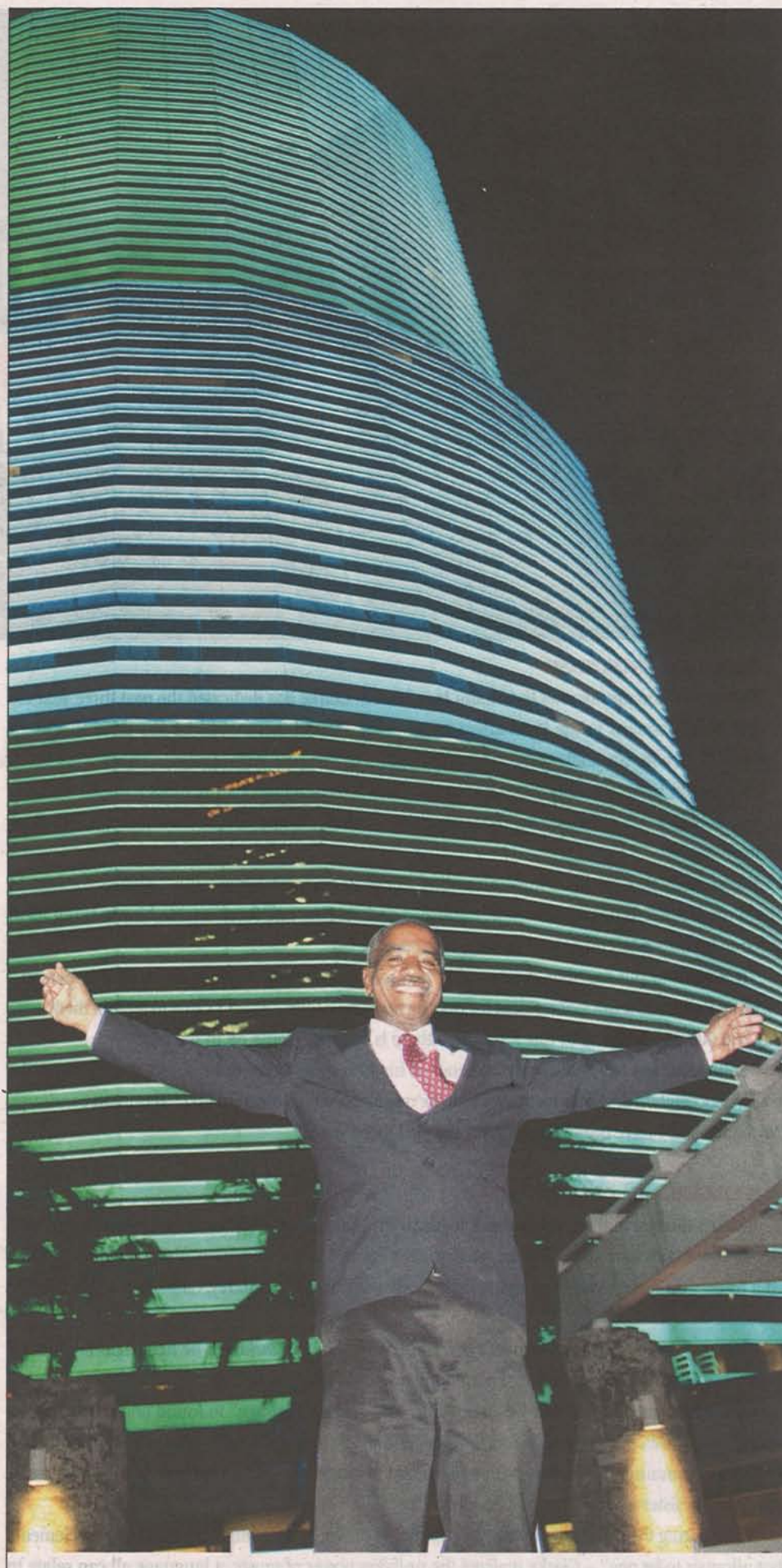
"We were just going to say hello. Keith's cousin was visiting from England. We got to talking about jazz and history, and one thing led to another. And there we were, celebrating Christmas at a twenty-foot-long table, with 24 of Clarke's family members."

"Keith had this all planned out!" Colbert concludes. "They were the most wonderful, loving bunch of people. It's all about love."

Clarke's aptitude for using what is at his disposal to create a stage for what he most loves has flourished with time. This man of deep knowledge and bohemian experience has taken the "Keith-and-Keith" parties he and a friend developed in Atlanta in the '90s and transplanted the concept here. And he is leading the charge to expand this love of jazz with a new generation.

"Jazz has a way of taking dated music and making it timeless, because of the instrumentalist's or vocalist's mastery and improvisation," explains Clarke.

His weekly film series and monthly jazz concerts are his creative courage at work for the benefit of all willing to come out and enjoy his offerings. Whether a young jazz aficionado, a new Brickell resident, a visiting tourist, a banker or attorney, one will find a welcoming smile at the Tower.



"Synchronicity comes together at Keith's events," Colbert notes. "Keith is a soul-filled guy that exudes love. Love is what he does. He loves music and loves bringing it to people."

To learn more about the entertainment offered by the Miami Jazz Society, visit miamijazzsociety.com.