THE DOCTOR IS IN

By RUSSELL OLIVO

WOONSOCKET — He’s a restaurateur, a photographer, a painter and a music promoter, but soon there will be another word people can use to describe John Chan: “Doctor.”

The proprietor of Chan’s Fine Oriental Dining, an internationally-known showcase for jazz and blues, Chan will receive an honorary doctor of fine arts degree from Providence College during his alma mater’s 103rd commencement exercises next month, PC announced.

“Totally unexpected,” Chan told The Call. “I didn’t know what to say. It’s quite an honor and really humbling.”

Chan said he received a call giving him advance warning of the tribute, which PC made public a few days ago.

“John Chan is known in Rhode Island, throughout New England and beyond for two reasons,” PC said on its website. “One is the fine food served at his Woonsocket restaurant, Chan’s Fine Oriental Dining. The other is for his tireless and decades-long promotion of both famous and upcoming jazz, blues, folk and cabaret artists and comedians who he has invited to perform at the restaurant.”

The list is “long and legendary,” PC said, from giants like Dizzy Gillespie and Leon Redbone to Livingston Taylor and blues rocker James Montgomery. Additionally, the college said Chan has been instrumental in launching the careers of budding homegrown talents, including guitar whiz Duke Robillard, the brass band Roomful of Blues and saxophonists Greg Abate and Scott Hamilton.

A longtime city resident who has an abiding interest in visual art, Chan is also a photographer and painter who continues studying at the Providence Watercolor Society.

He graduated from PC in 1974 and credits his experiences there with igniting his passion for music.

He was introduced to jazz by his PC roommates, Joseph Small and Nehru King — a PC basketball star who had a music show on WDOM radio, the college’s station. Chan worked as a dishwasher, cook and server at the family-owned restaurant during college, and came up with the idea to offer this style of music to patrons.

Chan said the concept for what’s come to be known as “jazz and jazz” was born in a now-defunct Providence venue known as Joe’s Upstairs. It, too, was a restaurant that featured live music, and it became his go-to hangout for downtime when he wasn’t studying. It was there that he first saw Hamilton, the saxophonist, perform.

“Maybe this can work at Chan’s,” he thought to himself. “That’s how I got the idea initiated in my head that maybe it can work.”

One of the first jazz ensembles to perform at Chan’s in 1977 featured members that included the late great pianist Dave McKenna – a Woonsocket native whose sister, vocalist Jeanne McKenna, appeared regularly at Autumnfest for many years. Another member, also a Woonsocket native, was trombonist Sammy Sherman, the father of Daryl Sherman, who works as a vocalist in New York City and occasionally returns to her hometown to perform here.

Chan’s efforts to mix music and food gained the attention – and support – of Ron Della Chiesa, the longtime host of Boston-based WGBH’s “Music America” – at the time one of the best-known showcases for jazz in the region.

Located at 267 Main St., Chan’s has been a family-owned restaurant since John Chan’s parents bought it from friends in 1965, at which time it was called Shangh hai Restaurant. His father Ben died in 1980, but his mother, Ethel Moy Chan, remained active in the restaurant’s affairs for many years before she passed away in 2017 at the age of 91.

Ironically, Chan’s recognition for promoting music comes in the midst of an era – slowly ebbing away perhaps – in which he hasn’t been able to do much of it at all. For much of the last year or so, restaurants have been operating at partial seating capacity due to COVID-19, making it next to impossible to sufficiently fill venues, large and small, to properly pay talent and still make a profit.

Never mind booking talent, says Chan, just seating enough people in the dining room to make ends meet has been a challenge during the pandemic.

But Chan says he’s optimistic that the dry spell will soon be over and he’ll be getting back to the usual business of putting on full-scale shows in the intimate setting of Chan’s stage room – a former bank that still has a vault.

“It’s been a long haul and a very challenging year,” he says. “Fortunately we have the drive-up window. Most of the restaurants around us were closed and we were slammed every night during the pandemic.”

This isn’t the first time Chan has been recognized for his contributions to keeping jazz and blues alive. He was inducted into the Rhode Island Music Hall of Fame in 2018. Also, he received the Pell Award for Excellence in the Arts from Trinity Repertory Company in 2015, and in 2011 the esteemed Keeping the Blues Alive Foundation, headquartered in Memphis, recognized him with its eponymously named Keeping the Blues Alive Award.

He’ll be in good company when he picks up his honorary degree during PC’s commencement exercises on May 20. Other recipients include Dr. Laurie Santos, a Yale University psychology professor and host of “The Happiness Lab” podcast; Duane Bouligny, a Wells Fargo & Co. investment banker who is a former trustee and mentor to multicultural students at PC, Emily Leary, a Connecticut philanthropist and humanitarian who has been a longtime supporter of the college, and E. James Mulcahy, a retired Morgan Stanley executive and inaugural president of the College’s National Board of Overseers. Most of the honorees are alumnae.

Chan still has solid relationships with some of his former classmates at PC, which he calls “a great school.” When he first took a call about this story, in fact, he was on the golf course with former PC hoop stars Ernie DiGregorio and Kevin Stacon, both of whom later played in the NBA.

But he’s still not sure he’s comfortable with the title “doctor.” He says that belongs to his brother, Dr. William Chan, who also got his undergraduate degree from PC.

“Don’t call me Dr. Chan,” he says. “Call me Dr. John. It sounds more like a rock star.”

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John Chan, longtime owner of Chan’s Fine Oriental Dining in Woonsocket, will be presented an honorary doctorate degree from Providence College during the school’s commencement ceremonies in May.