

# JerseyJazz

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An internationally flavored quintet led by Australian reedman Adrian Cunningham (2nd from left) performed a tribute to clarinetist Benny Goodman at this year's Chicken Fat Ball in Maplewood. In the group were Rossano Sportiello (piano), Nicki Parrott (bass), Chuck Redd (vibes) and Aaron Kimmel (drums). Photo by Lynn Redmile.

## Jumpin' At The Woodland

### Swing Fans Flock To The Chicken Fat Ball

The venerable Chicken Fat Ball returned to its former home on Woodland Avenue in Maplewood on January 8, where a packed house turned out for a master class in the small group jazz of the 1930s and '40s with tributes to the music of Benny Goodman and Django Reinhardt.

Story and photos on page 22.

48TH ANNUAL PEE WEE RUSSELL  
MEMORIAL STOMP  
March 26 at the Birchwood Manor  
see details page 19

## Small Groups Swing Big At Maplewood's Chicken Fat Ball

By Tony Mottola | Photos by Lynn Redmile

After a four-year hiatus in the staid alcohol-free pews of the Prospect Presbyterian Church, the Chicken Fat Ball returned to its previous longtime home in the folksy barrel-roofed The Woodland (formerly the Maplewood Women's Club) on January 8. Also back were the table setups, complete with bottles of wine and plates of antipasto, crackers and cheese.

The first-ever CFB (featuring South Hampton Dixie Racing and Clam Baking Society Jazz Band) was staged 53

years ago in 1964, but there were no Balls from 1974 to 1994, so round numbers this was its 32nd presentation. The producers have a taste for classic swing jazz and a knack for enticing the best players to venture out to the Essex County suburbs, over the years presenting notables like Wild Bill Davison, Frank Foster, Lou McGarity, Derek Smith, Joe Temperley, Randy Sandke and many more. The event, always on the first Sunday of the year, derives its catchy name from the fact that the originators — Al Kuehn and Don Greenwood — were in Katzman's Jewish Deli in Irvington trying to come up with a name for the jazz party they were planning as a reunion with school friends when they espied a bowl of freshly rendered schmaltz.

The Ball's usual format of one band playing two sets was altered this year to present two groups, one led by Adrian Cunningham performing the music of Benny Goodman's small groups and the other led by Jason Anick paying tribute to Django Reinhardt's famed three-guitar "Quintet of the Hot Club of France."

Cunningham's group, which included Rossano Sportiello (piano), Nikki Parrott (bass), Aaron Kimmel (drums) and Chuck Redd (vibes) got the show off to a quick start with "Air Mail Special." The lively set included a run through many of the Goodman small format hits, "Avalon" and "Moonglow" among them, and less well-known gems like "I'm a Ding Dong Daddy From Dumas."

Cunningham's clarinet playing is nimble and tuneful, and abetted by Sportiello's fleet right hand and Redd's quicksilver vibes the trio gamely recreated the swinging spirit of the sound Goodman originated with Teddy Wilson and Lionel Hampton in the 1930s and '40s. There was certainly nothing to complain about, but one



At the Chicken Fat Ball in Maplewood it's all hands on deck for a fiery finish.

could not be faulted for missing a guitar in the mix, given the importance of Charlie Christian in those small group recordings.

Goodman's closing theme, Gordon Jenkins's lonely "Goodbye," came next to last. To close Cunningham instead chose a small format take on "Sing, Sing, Sing" highlighted by a bravura piano solo and a crowd-pleasing last chorus by the leader that took him to the tippy top of his horn's upper limits.

Jason Anick, a young jazz

violin and mandolin star who's based in Boston where he also teaches at Berklee College of Music, led the afternoon's second group in a salute to Django Reinhardt. He was joined by his Gypsy jazz Rhythm Future Quartet bandmates, Ollie Soikelli and Max O'Rourke, bassist Nicki Parrott (doing double CFB duty) and what he called "our ringer and secret weapon," 12-year-old guitarist Henry Acker whose command on the frets was indeed impressive.

Master Henry isn't the first noteworthy phenom to impress at the Chicken Fat Ball. Violinist Jonathan Russell performed memorably in 2009 with Ken Peplowski and the young trumpet star Geoff Gallante played a guest spot a few years ago.

The quintet performed eight tunes associated with the great guitarist, with all of the requisite Roma panache and "La Pompe." The set included some of the most memorable numbers in the Reinhardt oeuvre, including "Minor Swing," "Improvisation #1" and "Nuages." And, although the emphasis here was on the acoustic guitar in the Gypsy style, the set's standout performance may have been a bare essentials violin and bass duet of "On the Sunny Side of the Street" that showcased Acker's singing violin accompanied by Parrott's empathetic bass support.

After a short break it was all hands on deck from both quintets for three closing numbers, "Honeysuckle Rose," "Topsy" and "Sweet Georgia Brown."

To put a cherry on the day for the NJJS, former Board member Sheila Lenga gathered \$270 in 50-50 proceeds and vice president Stew Schiffer and board member Peter Grice rang up \$230 in donated CD, LP and book sales fattening the Society's coffers by \$500 for the day. □

Chuck Redd



Jason Anick



Rossano Sportiello



Olli Soikelli



Adrian Cunningham



Rossano Sportiello and Chuck Redd.



Jason Anick, Olli Soikelli, Nicki Parrott, Henry Acker and Max O'Rourke

