

Jersey Jazz

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Rio Clemente and Frank Nissel pose with the NJJS's Kawai grand piano at the instrument's new home at Hibiscus Restaurant in Morristown.

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Co-Editors *Jersey Jazz*

The invitation arrived by E-mail and a few days later, a group of 40 or so NJJSers and friends found themselves enjoying food, drink, and

the company of jazz musicians and aficionados. The venue was Hibiscus, the restaurant in the Best Western Morristown Inn. The reason for the

November 5 reception: the rededication of the gorgeous NJJS piano placed in the service of jazz at this relatively new haven for live music.

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Perpetual Piano

PIANO

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Re-dedication because the instrument had already been dedicated once, way back in 1992, at its original home: the Cornerstone in Metuchen. But the Cornerstone is no more; it's now a new place and the music schedule no longer includes the three-nights-per-week live jazz that was part of the original contract. So, some brainstorming ensued, the movers were called, and the baby grand piano was settled into its cozy new surroundings.

Rio Clemente tickled the keys and we acquainted ourselves with the pleasing acoustics and delicious wines. Munching skewered chicken with peanut dip, stuffed veggies, spinach turnovers, cheeses and finger sandwiches, we were welcomed by Bill Boyle, owner of the Boyle Hotel Group. Saying he's been a "closet jazz fan," his father having introduced him to all the great players in his youth, he thanked Bree Jackson, who in 2008 started booking the jazz programming here, for opening his eyes to the fact that "there's great jazz right here in New Jersey" (which statement received affirmation from those assembled). "This has been a great awakening for me."

He explained that business partner Bryan Curtis has also been a mentor, introducing him to many artists. "We are very proud to be the first corporate member of NJJS, and look forward to continued collaborations. We are here to promote live jazz." (More applause!)

Emcee Laura Hull called on former NJJS board member Frank Nissel, and he fleshed out the historic context. "I met my wife through this group [of jazz lovers that became NJJS]. Cornerstone was our music headquarters. So many great players entertained us there: John Bunch, Teddy Wilson, Dave McKenna, Dan Barrett, Howard Alden, the Vachés, when Warren was only that high. The music was programmed by Warren's dad [the late bassist Warren, Sr.]."

He went on, "I'll tell you the story of the piano. Cornerstone had a junky, clunky upright piano with all these world-class players! I had come into a little money, and I said to John Bunch, please pick out the best piano



Clockwise from top left: Bree Jackson, photo courtesy of her Web site; Marlene VerPlanck; Frank Noviello; Laura Hull; Jane Stuart; Bill Boyle.

you can find. He measured the space and did a lot of research, and came up with this 6-foot Steinway-designed Kawai. I bought the piano and the bench (through the years two benches have disappeared) and presented it to the NJJS. At that time, Helen Dorn was our president and she and her husband Dave were Cornerstone regulars. Dave had just died so at the inaugural, I dedicated it to him. Cornerstone and then Novita was supposed to maintain it, but they never did, so I've maintained it with a great piano tuner in New Brunswick and it still sounds marvelous. John Bunch still thinks it's a great piano."

The contract also stated that jazz was to be presented three nights a week, and that wasn't happening, hence the move. Says Frank, "I don't play, but I love music and I have a good ear." Always pursuing great music, he told us he'd spent the afternoon with Howard Alden and Warren Vaché at an Arbors Records recording session.

He also took a moment to remember another longtime NJJS member: "We lost Lou Ginsberg last week. He was 96, godfather of John Pizzarelli. He owned a jazz restaurant and all the musicians knew him very well."

Laura introduces Karlene Brandon, proprietor of Hibiscus. "Her handsome husband Orville" produces the fine Caribbean fare. We also meet Bree Jackson, who says, "It's been a joy working with Orville and Karlene. The musicians love working here."

Laura explains, "We've developed a very interesting family. Boyle Hotel Group was a spon-

sor of the wristbands for Jazz-fest and was our primary hotelier." She goes on to say that "this has become a singers' room" — there's a modest disruption when a songstress in the audience, Marlene VerPlanck, calls out, "If it's a singer's room, they need a spotlight!" The crowd titters and owner Bill Boyle responds, "I hear you!" (Squeaky wheels...)

And then the entertainment portion of the evening kicks into high gear as Laura calls our attention to the numerous singers in the room and each in turn rises to the forefront to give us a tune.

Laura officially introduces Marlene and reminds us of the Billy VerPlanck tribute on November 9. Marlene sings "I Thought About You."

Crooner Frank Noviello does a pleasingly swingly "I Didn't Know What Time It Was."

Vocalist Jane Stuart announces her selection will be a tribute to Quintano's School for Young Professionals (a *Fame*-style institution behind Carnegie Hall that both she and Laura attended) — "Exactly Like You." Jane has upcoming gigs at Hibiscus, with Ted Brancato.

Rio begins an elaborate intro to "Where or When," and Laura, who's up next in the singer's spot, points out it's not in her key. Rio initiates a do-over by seemingly playing the already-played notes backwards into the piano, much to our amusement.

Rio gets to solo on *Autumn Leaves*, and then quickly heads out to his regular weekly gig at the Bernards Inn in Bernardsville.

We've enjoyed the wine and Laura advises us it came courtesy of Amalthea Wines in Atco NJ. More reasons to be proud of all that is New Jersey.

Editor Tony Mottola supplies the closing number to everyone's astonishment. His opinion: "It's a really nice piano." **JJ**

Hibiscus Restaurant is located at Best Western Morristown Inn, 270 South Street 07960. They offer live jazz on Tuesdays and Fridays. See their ad on page xx for a list of upcoming performers. Call 973-359-0200 or visit www.hibiscusrestaurantnj.com for updates.

Find out more about Jersey wines at www.amaltheacellars.com.