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MVP: Marlene Shines at Jazz Feast

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The Most Valuable Player award at the 2009 JazzFeast surely goes to the inestimable vocalist Marlene VerPlanck. After all she has the perfect monogram, and her performance in Princeton on September 12 was near perfect as well.

Billed as *Marlene Meets the Saxophones*, her fast-paced set

featured 19 gems of American song backed by a swinging band that featured four saxes and a killer rhythm section. That unusual reed-filled instrumentation is nothing new for the singer. She recorded two CDs in Paris with the French group Saxomania, *Marlene VerPlanck Meets Saxomania* and *What Are We Gonna*

Do With All This Moonlight? — and the Princeton show “brought back loads of memories,” she said afterwards.

Memories that surely included her husband and musical partner Billy VerPlanck who died earlier this year. Billy was a fixture at all of Marlene’s performances, and his absence was

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MARLENE VER PLANCK AND JAZZFEAST

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felt by many in attendance at the Princeton show.

The couple met in the waning days of the big bands when Billy played trombone for the Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey band and Marlene was the band's singer. They later had long careers as session players in New York's busy recording studios before turning their full attention to Marlene's career as a singer. Billy, a gifted arranger, was Marlene's musical mentor and she was his muse; the musical settings he crafted presented her crystalline, pitch perfect voice to great advantage, and they produced many fine recordings together.

Asked which of the Princeton show's arrangements were written by VerPlanck, Marlene replied simply: "All of the songs I sing are arrangements by Billy. All 20 CDs and everything else I might not have recorded. This includes piano arrangements, trio arrangements, big band, symphony, and the sax book. Billy was a genius and I was lucky to be his musical partner as well as partner in life."

Despite her recent loss, Marlene's performance was filled with a joy for music, and her voice and presence radiated a warm glow from the stage that dispelled the uncharacteristic sunless gray weather that prevailed at this year's JazzFeast.



In a jazz world where songs can drag on for eight minutes or more, Marlene (with Billy's help) doesn't waste a note. When she sings she believes every word and a story is told — beginning, middle and end — in two or three choruses. Each song seems perfectly complete and satisfying.

The repertoire of delightful miniatures that Marlene presented at JazzFeast ranged through the best of the American songbook, from Gershwin ("Embraceable You") to Berlin ("Let's Face the Music and Dance") to Ellington ("I'm Just a Lucky So and So") and many others. Also included were two fine tunes by Billy VerPlanck, "What Are We Gonna Do With All This Moonlight?" and "Left Bank Blues." And for sheer jazz vocalizing and playing, the raucous "El Cajon" was a showstopper.

In another lifetime Marlene VerPlanck anonymously sang her way into America's cultural consciousness with such ditties as "Winston tastes good, like a (snap-snap) cigarette

should" and "Mmm-mmm good, mmm-mmm good, that's what Campbell's soups are..." And she sang in the background for everyone from Sinatra and Bennett to KISS and Blood, Sweat and Tears. But over time she has become one of the first ladies of American jazz singing, and she shone brightly in the solo spotlight at this year's JazzFeast.

Oh yes, there was lots more music at JazzFeast. And plenty of appetizing food as well, from 17 area restaurants at stands arrayed around Palmer Square Green. At JazzFeast one is the main event, and the other is the main attraction. I'm not sure which is which. But despite the less than ideal weather the restaurateurs and the musicians did fine business with several thousand people filling the picturesque square.

The now perennial Alan Dale Legacy Band opened the festival, as they have for all of the event's 18 years. Their appearance may be required by local ordinance at this point.





The Dale outfit delivered their usual high-energy swing music and this year peppered their set with a couple of well-received bop tunes.

Dale's music engages people, at Princeton particularly moving one young tyke, who alternately danced around in front of the bandstand and stood and studied the musicians. After a bit he walked off, coming back a few minutes later with a long twig. A few moments' more study of the band and he began to play along using the stick like a horn. Seeing this prodigy out front, Dale invited the youngster to the bandstand where he promptly jumped up, joined the horn section, and twigged his way through the next two tunes. Not dropping a note on his twigbone as far as I could tell.

The youth theme carried over when the latest crop of young jazzers from across the street, the 2009 Princeton University Jazztet, took the stage. The group, comprised of Jackson Greenberg on vibes, Jason Weinreb, piano, Robert Sicurelli, bass and Kevin Laskey, drums, turned in a set of well played straight-ahead jazz, all under the watchful eye of the university's director of Jazz Studies, Professor Anthony D. J. Branker, who paced nervously and nodded approvingly.

As it often does, the JazzFeast lineup made some room for the blues, a whole Roomful of Blues this time in fact. Led by guitarist Chris Vachon with the gritty and soulful Dave Howard on vocals, the Roomful



ensemble grooved their way through jump, swing, blues, R&B and soul numbers that inspired stage-side dancing by several generations of fans.

As tradition has it, JazzFeast closes with a trad band, and the Smith Street Society Jazz Band ably filled that role, led by the irrepressible Bruce McNichols on banjo, tenor guitar and whistle. The good time music brought a smile and sent the crowd home happy.

The day was filled with fine performances by more than two dozen top tier jazz players — who mightily gave their all to entertain an appreciative audience — but the fullest round of applause was reserved for JazzFeast producer Jack Stine who announced that he was stepping down after 18 years of running the event. Palmer Square JazzFeast organizer Anita Fresolone presented Jack with a plant, announced a \$2,000 donation to the NJJS scholarship fund in his honor, and offered words of gratitude

for his years of presenting jazz in Princeton.

Jack then announced that cornetist and NJJS member Ed Polcer, who has played at JazzFeast several times and was on hand observing the scene this year, would begin producing the event next year. He says that he's sure Mr. Polcer, a Princeton grad, will do a fine job and there's no reason to doubt him. Ed is an ardent supporter of jazz music.

But you have to tip your hat to a fellow who devoted himself, in a labor of love, to creating and nurturing a music event that's become an annual occasion that uplifts its community and has become a much-anticipated, red-letter day on the calendar of thousands of jazz enthusiasts.

Good work Jack.

JJ

p. 28, top right: Jim Gibble in the Alan Dale band, trombone, with twig kid; center: Doug Woolvertone Roomful of Blues' trumpet; bottom: Bruce McNichols, banjo, leader Smith Street Society Band.

p. 29, top left: Alan Dale; top right: Jack Stine with Anita Fresolone and Ed Polcer; below: Jason Weinreb, Princeton University Jazztet, piano.

