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Some “audience favorites” perform at Jack Kleinsinger’s Highlights in Jazz May 12 concert, from left: Frank Vignola, Jack Wilkins, Alexis Cole, Nicki Parrott, Bria Skonberg and Wycliffe Gordon. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

The People’s Choice Septet

The Highlights In Jazz May 12 concert at the downtown Manhattan Tribeca Performing Arts Center was billed as *Audience Favorites* and brought together seven of the series’ most popular artists, including previous HIJ award winner Wycliffe Gordon. He was joined by trumpeter/vocalist Bria Skonberg, guitarists Jack Wilkins and Frank Vignola, bassist/

vocalist Nicki Parrott and drummer Alvin Atkinson. Making her first *official* HIJ appearance was vocalist Alexis Cole. Impresario Jack Kleinsinger explained, “She was a surprise guest last year and the audience loved her, so I wanted to bring her back.” Joe Lang’s review is in *Caught in the Act* on page 41.

PLUS

Way Down Yonder In Cape May!

Exit 0 Jazz Festival thrives on the Jersey Shore. Sandy Ingham reports on page 28.

Diversity Is The Key At Exit 0 Jazz Festival

By Sandy Ingham

Variety is not just the spice of life. It's also one important ingredient in cooking up a successful jazz festival.

The April 22-24 edition of the Exit 0 festival in Cape May ignited with an explosion of Latin percussion, and, 39 performances by 17 bands at seven venues later, hit the road with brass band bluster. In between, nearly every genre of jazz was represented in the historic seaside resort.

The perpetually smiling Pedrito Martinez and his quartet were first up, with an innards-shaking electric bass groove and piercing electric piano and organ wails framing the leader's dazzling handiwork on an array of drums. "We're just here to add color," said bassist Alvaro Benavides. "It's all about the drums."

Pedrito is a passionate singer, too, and the three- and four-part vocal harmonies enhanced the funky Afro-Cuban tunes inspired by his native Cuba.

Joey Alexander is a phenom, a 12-year-old from Bali, dwarfed by the Steinway grand piano at Convention Hall who quickly proved its master. He awed listeners with his command of modern jazz repertoire, its rhythms, harmonies and dynamics.

Alexander opened with a deceptively simple "Ma Blues," gradually embellishing the melody and kicking up the intensity to a frenetic peak, then easing back down. His communication with trio mates Ulysses Owens (drums) and Alexander Claffy (bass) was flawless.

Herbie Hancock's "Maiden Voyage" emerged after a camouflaged introduction, and Alexander then turned to John Coltrane's challenging "Countdown." "This is really hard," he tried to convince the already blown-away crowd. "I'm serious!" Then he nailed it at breakneck speed.

Guitarist Brian Betz was joined by Behn Gillette on vibes for some Saturday noontime salutes to the music's past masters. Charlie Parker's "Scrapple from the Apple," Horace Silver's beloved "Song for My Father" and Miles Davis's classic "All Blues" were splendid, and the ballad "Body

and Soul" hushed the often-rowdy crowd at Carney's bar.

René Marie is a seductive singer, as she demonstrated on her last CD, a tribute to Eartha Kitt (*I Wanna Be Evil*, Motema Music). Her new record, *Color of Red*, filled the bill at her Convention Hall set, but she opened with an a cappella "Nothing Compares 2U," the love song by Prince, a tender eulogy just days after his death.

Marie is a skillful songwriter, drawing on her own life experience for well-crafted songs about an imagined affair ("If You Were Mine"), a real one ("Go Home"), stress and strife ("Lost"), and serenity ("Colorado River Song"). "The South Is Mine" shares a title with a poem by Marie's father, commemorating his defiant stance against racism in Jim Crow-era Virginia. Her closing "Blessings" reached out to the whole world and helped earn a standing ovation.

Four Guys in Search of a Tune is my biased summary of the hard-bop set led by gruff-toned tenor Joe Lovano and guitarist John Scofield. For me, music begins with melody, and the leaders' original compositions mostly didn't qualify. "Dear Old Bird" was a lyrical ballad, but others seemed to be random collections of aggressively delivered notes. Even Scofield's bluesy "Slinky" soon wandered into avant garde territory.

By contrast, the pairing of Pat Metheny and Ron Carter was a subdued and mellow delight. Much-loved melodies — "My Funny Valentine," "Day in the Life of a Fool," "Freddy Freeloader" — were all delicately treated by the renowned guitarist and bassist. Each plucked a solo medley before they cut loose joyously on the finale, Sonny Rollins's classic "St. Thomas."

Combine a New Orleans-style brass band horn section with a gospel-wailing quartet (minus the heavy religious content) and add



Singer René Marie paid tribute to Prince at the Exit 0 Jazz Festival. Photo by Richard Skelly.

in lots of showbiz flair, and Brother Josephus and the Love Revolution is the most pleasure-providing result. The New York-based octet played four sets over two nights at the club Cabanas, and succeeded in its mission to spread peace and love and a rockin' good time to all.

Upstairs at the Iron Pier restaurant, Ameranouche, a two-guitar and bass trio from New England, huddled

around a faux-flame fire pit to revisit the romantic Gypsy jazz made famous by Django Reinhardt in to 1930s and '40s.

Azerbaijan-born pianist and composer Amina Figarova and her sextet played two sets of her original works at the historic Congress Hall ballroom. The material shared a restless quality, straying from one key to the next, and was drawn from her latest CD, *Blue Whisper*. The title tune opened with a contemplative piano solo, giving way to Wayne Escoffery's exploratory soprano sax solo and stepped-up bass work by Luques Curtis.

"Traveler" reflected the hectic life of the touring band, while "Hear My Voice" was inspired by a conversation Figarova had with a young girl frightened by the surge in gun violence and compassion for marchers protesting gun deaths. A funeral march drumbeat underscored the mournful ballad and a voiceover tape of the young girl's lament.

"Seagulls" began with high-pitched squalls from the three horns, and "Hewa" (Swahili for "air") was a tranquil tribute to the quality of the atmosphere the composer perceived while touring in South Africa.

The High and Mighty Brass Band from New York closed out the festival, blasting sounds out onto Beach Drive, just as bands do on Bourbon Street.

Exit 0's annual fall event (Nov. 11-13) has booked Wynton Marsalis and sensational singer Cécile McLorin Salvant. □



SARI KESSLER

The Kitano, NYC | May 15

When you enjoy a first recording by a vocalist whom you have not heard before, you wonder if you will get the same positive impression from a personal appearance. In the case of Sari Kessler, whose album *Do Right* was reviewed in the last issue of *Jersey Jazz*, seeing her perform a set at the Kitano validated that the appeal of her recording translated well in a live performance.

Kessler was celebrating the release of *Do Right*, and a real celebration it was indeed. She was in fine vocal form, full of spirit and enthusiasm, and had an audience that consistently provided warm encouragement. Supporting her she had three of the players on her album, trumpeter/flugelhornist Nadje Noordhuis, pianist John di Martino and bassist Steve Whipple, plus drummer Andrew Atkinson, all of whom were fully in the spirit of the occasion.

The program emphasized the songs included on the album. Kessler had chosen a nice mix for the disc, one that enabled her to show that she was comfortable with a variety of tempi, and a range of songs from vintage standards like "After You've Gone" and "Moon Glow" to songs from the '60s such as "Walk on By" and "Sunny."

She expressed her admiration for Peggy Lee by including the song that inspired the album title, "Why Don't You Do Right," and "It's a Good Day." Kessler wrote one original for the album, "My Empty Bed Blues," and it was enhanced at the Kitano by some nifty plunger mute work by Noordhuis.

John di Martino has become one of the go-to accompanists for singers, and his sparkling pianism on this occasion demonstrated why this is the case. He understands fully what it takes to bring out the best in the singer whom he is supporting, and puts the vocalist in a comfort zone that enables her to concentrate on vocalizing. The good chemistry between Kessler and di Martino was apparent throughout the set.

In this day and age, it is a struggle for a jazz-oriented singer like Sari Kessler to find enough performance opportunities. So far, *Do Right* has been receiving impressive airplay that will hopefully open up live performance opportunities in keeping with what Kessler's talent warrants. She certainly proved at the Kitano that she delivers when given the opportunity.

MARLENE VERPLANCK

Birdland, NYC | May 15

Seeing and hearing Marlene VerPlanck at Birdland, it is hard to believe that it has been over 60 years since she released her first album. She has retained a consistently high level of artistry throughout her career.

This evening VerPlanck was celebrating the release of her most recent album, *The Mood I'm In*. To help her on this occasion, she called upon a superb quartet of musicians, cornetist Warren Vaché, pianist Tomoko Ohno, bassist Jay Leonhart and drummer Ron Vincent. They provided a perfect bed of support for VerPlanck's spot-on singing.

In a program that flowed nicely from one selection to the next, she sang ten of the twelve tunes from the album, and eight songs from past releases.

She set the right tone with her first song, "The Mood I'm In," and it was immediately apparent that not only were she and her band in the right mood, but the audience response made it evident that they were equally tuned into the moment.

As the tunes flowed forth, VerPlanck caressed the ballads lovingly, and let her natural sense of swing inhabit the more quickly paced selections.

In any performance, certain moments tend to stand above the others. In this performance, the level of musicality kept itself in a high place, but among the songs that stuck around after the set was over were "Free and Easy," "It Shouldn't Happen to a Dream," "Where Can I Go Without You," "I Want to Talk about You," "All Too Soon" and "In April."

Vaché always adds a special something to any group with which he appears. The lyricism and imagination in his playing is breathtaking. Very few horn players have the kind of sensitivity that is at the heart of effective accompaniment for a vocalist. Vaché is among the best.

Ohno is also a marvelous accompanist with jazz chops to spare. Leonhart is one of the first names to be mentioned when conversation turns to naming the best bass players on the scene. Vincent is a faultless timekeeper, and a master of subtle accents.

The audience at Birdland got a taste of what Marlene VerPlanck enthusiasts have experienced on countless occasions, a vocalist who combines musicianship, respect for the words that she sings, a consistent jazz feeling and a voice that rests as easily on the ears as any in the business. As the song says, "Who could ask for anything more?"

HIGHLIGHTS IN JAZZ Audience Favorites

BMCC TRIBECA Performing Arts Center, NYC
May 12

Jack Kleinsinger announced at the beginning of this Highlights in Jazz concert that he selected as audience favorites musicians who had elicited letters to him from attendees at his concerts, now in their 44th year. Given the amazing roster of players who have graced the stage during his concerts, it must have been a difficult job to sort through the mail, and select players who represented a spectrum of players who had been participants across the years.

Since many of the players are no longer with us, the emphasis was on players from the latter part of the series. The one major exception was to be Bucky Pizzarelli who has been playing in the series since the earliest days, but he was unable to participate due to health problems. A second planned appearance was sidetracked by the sudden illness experienced by drummer Alvin Atkinson.

Trombonist Wycliffe Gordon hosted the first set. Pianist Chris Pattishall, bassist Nicki Parrott and drummer Kenny Hassler formed the rhythm section. Gordon is a superbly creative trombonist, and a superior showman, one of those cats who makes jazz fun for the listener while he is out front. Gordon is also a singer in the tradition of Louis Armstrong, not possessed of a classic singing voice, but able to put a song across with style, feeling and that special something that is hard to describe, but you know it when you hear it.

He set opened with a song whose title touches upon the essence of jazz, "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)." On "Honeysuckle Rose," the trio stated the theme, and then Gordon came in on a slide trumpet. His vocals on both numbers were robust and filled with the humor that is so much a part of his stage personality.

Another instrumentalist/singer soon arrived in stage in the person of trumpeter Bria Skonberg. She and Gordon offered up a playful take on "I Can't Give You Anything but Love." Gordon took a break while Parrott gave a sampling of her vocal prowess with

the Latin-tinged "Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps," sung in both Spanish and English.

Gordon returned to participate in the final three selections, "After You've Gone," "Creole Love Call" and "When the Saints Go Marching In" into which Gordon interpolated "I'll Be Glad When You're Dead, You Rascal, You." He dedicated "Creole Love Call" to the recently departed Joe Temperley, long a fixture on the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra where Gordon also held a seat for many years. Parrott provided a haunting wordless vocal on "Creole Love Call" that recalled the contribution by Adelaide Hall on the original recording by the Duke Ellington Orchestra.

Opening the second set was the guitar duo of Frank Vignola and Jack Wilkins. Wilkins was the substitute for Pizzarelli. They played "Body and Soul" and "There Will Never be Another You," exhibiting the kind of natural empathy essential to effective duo performances.

The balance of the set featured vocalist Alexis Cole. Cole has a wonderfully flexible voice, and a great jazz sensitivity. She was joined by Parrott, Gordon and Skonberg for her lilting take on "A Beautiful Friendship". A while back, Cole performed a terrific program of Hoagy Carmichael songs at the Metropolitan Room. Her affinity for Carmichael's music was evident on her "Stardust," backed solely by Vignola. The full group took "East of the Sun" at a medium swing tempo, with Cole adding an effective scat interlude.

Cole often accompanies herself on piano at her gigs, and she gave a taste of that aspect of her talent on "Estate," with support from Parrott, Wilkins and Hassler.

All hands were on deck for the finale, "Bye, Bye Blackbird." It brought an energetic and entertaining evening of fine jazz to a marvelous conclusion. Kleinsinger and Highlights in Jazz hit another home run!

DUCHESS

Jazz Standard, New York City May 18, 20162

A bit over a year ago the vocal harmony trio, Duchess — Amy Cervini, Hilary Gardner and Melissa Stylianou — celebrated the release of their first album at the Jazz Standard. As they are now preparing to record a second collection, the ladies returned to the Jazz Standard to reveal some of the new material that they were developing for this next release.

Well the best-laid plans do not always go as expected. Melissa Stylianou was delivered the devastating news that her father had passed away just a few days before the gig, and she headed home to Toronto for the funeral. In the true show must go on tradition, Cervini and Gardner were suddenly faced with putting together a replacement show.

Three part harmony singing demands preparation, practice and polishing to be effective, and without a vital cog in their group, the two ladies chose to employ a variety of guests to provide an evening of entertainment that would satisfy the expectations of the folks who arrived at the Jazz Standard expecting a Duchess performance.

Their planned quartet of musicians, reedman Jeff Lederer, pianist Michael Cabe, bassist Matt Aranoff and drummer Jared Schonig were present. They had three lady vocalists and a variety of musician friends join them at different junctures in the show.

Wendy Gilles was familiar with some of the Andrews Sisters material that is part of the Duchess repertoire, so she nicely handled "Oh, Johnny, Oh Johnny" and "Three Little Sisters."

Duchess sets usually have a few selections featuring one of the trio. This time out, Cervini turned to a song associated with Blossom Dearie, "Give Him the Ooh-La-La." "Hallelujah, I Love Him So" found Gardner in the spotlight.

Jane Monheit joined Cervini and Gardner to sing "Que Sera Sera," a song from the released *Duchess* album.

Jo Lawry performs as a solo vocal performer, and also has extensive experience as a backup singer for the likes of Sting. On her most recent album she had Sting as a guest for a duo on her original tune "Impossible." In this set, she took it by herself. Gardner then joined her for a well-delivered take on "Rhode Island Is Famous for You."

They have a Duchess arrangement for "Moonglow," but this time Cervini and Gardner adapted it for their two voices.

For the finale, Gilles joined them for "Chattanooga Choo Choo."

The instrumental guests included trombonist Josh Brown, trumpeter Mike Sailors and alto saxophonist/pianist Will Vinson. Along with Lederer, they floated in and out of the show in different combinations or as the sole horn player.

Given the trying set of circumstances, Cervini and Gardner did a fine job of piecing together an entertaining evening of music. Both ladies have a confident stage presence and a terrific sense of humor among their assets, so they made things flow smoothly.

Amy Cervini and Hilary Gardner were obviously saddened and affected by Stylianou's family loss, but they put their chins up and presented a show that would have made their missing partner smile through her tears.

LYRICS & LYRICISTS

I HAVE CONFIDENCE:

Rodgers After Hammerstein

Jazz Standard, New York City May 18, 20162

When thinking of the giants of the American Musical Theater, the name Richard Rodgers is certainly one that immediately comes to mind. He initially came to public awareness through his partnership with Lorenz Hart. After Hart's passing, he formed a working relationship with Oscar Hammerstein II, one that changed the face of the genre. After the death of Hammerstein, Rodgers was faced with the question of how to continue in the field that he loved. At first, he chose to write his own lyrics, but eventually worked with other lyricists to produce quality shows, but never achieved the box office success that he had with Hart and Hammerstein.

I Have Confidence: Rodgers After Hammerstein, the final Lyrics & Lyricists show of the 2016 season, concentrated on the later stage of the Rodgers career.

Probably the most popular songs from the Rodgers output from this period are "The Sweetest Sounds" from the show for which he provided the lyrics, **No Strings**, and the title song from his collaboration with Stephen Sondheim, "Do I Hear a Waltz."

There are plenty of other fine selections from these two shows, as well as the other productions that he brought to the boards, *Two By Two* and *I Remember Mama* with lyrics by Martin Charnin, with additional lyrics for the latter by Ray Jessel, and Rex with Sheldon Harnick providing the words. In addition, Rodgers provided the music and lyrics for new songs for the second film version of *State Fair* and the film version of *The Sound of Music*, and words and music for an original television musical, *Androcles and the Lion*."

continued on page 46

CAUGHT IN THE ACT

continued from page 45

Ted Chapin, President and Creative Director of the Rodgers & Hammerstein organization, conceived, wrote and hosted a program that presented nineteen songs representative of Rodgers later period. He engaged four singers, Ben Crawford, T. Oliver Reid, Betsy Wolfe and Karen Ziemba, and a superb sextet of musicians led by music director/pianist Joseph Thalkin, to bring these songs to vibrant life.

Chapin provided interesting and informative commentary throughout the evening, and he used the words of Richard Rodgers, interestingly read by Larry Pine, to give insight to what was shaping Rodgers thinking and creativity at various points of his career. Rear projections of theater posters, sheet music covers, photographs of scenes from shows and personalities, and video clips of Rodgers and others enhanced the production values of the program, one that was wonderfully staged and choreographed by Lorin Latarro.

It was appropriate that the cast opened the show with "I Have Confidence," for Rodgers, when faced with life after Hammerstein, did indeed have the confidence to continue to produce quality songs, and even to supply effective lyrics before he reverted to working with collaborators while

continuing to be a supreme creator of exceptional music that showed him to be among the finest melodists ever to write music.

The self-penned lyrics by Rodgers occupied the initial selections of the concert. "This Isn't Heaven," a lovely song sung by Bobby Darin in State Fair; "The Sweetest Sounds," "Loads of Love" and "Love Makes the World Go" from *No Strings*; and "Something Good" from *The Sound of Music*, provided good examples of just how fine a lyricist Rodgers was when inclined toward that task.

By interesting coincidence, *Do I Hear a Waltz* had been presented in concert form a week earlier at the City Center Encores series. This show found Stephen Sondheim supplying the lyrics for the Rodgers music. It was not a happy collaboration, but the songs that emerged are tuneful, and have typically brilliant Sondheim lyrics. Chapin chose to include some of the less frequently heard numbers from the show, "What Do We Do? We Fly!" "Someone Woke Up," "Someone Like You" and "Thank You So Much" to close the first act.

Following a brief Entr'acte comprising three tunes to initiate the Second Act, the cast gave a sprightly performance of "Do I Hear a Waltz," followed by

"Strangers" from *Androcles and the Lion*,

The balance of the show had three numbers from *Two By Two*, and two each from *Rex* and *I Remember Mama*.

What was evident throughout the program was that Rodgers gift for melody remained with him until the end of his career.

The cast was a bit uneven. Wolfe and Ziemba sparkled throughout. Reid sang well, but does not exude the charisma that Wolf and Ziemba conveyed. Crawford has a strong and resonant voice, but had a tendency to over-sing at times, making it difficult to pick up on the lyrics. Pine was effective in presenting comments from Rodgers, but his voice and style of speaking was far more robust than the way Rodgers sounded in the various video clips that were included in the program.

Overall, the show proved to be a wonderful look at an important phase of the career of Richard Rodgers. It likely convinced many who enjoyed what they experienced on this occasion to seek out cast recordings of the later Rodgers shows. I know that I will be doing so quickly. J



A HOT JAZZ CLASS PHOTO: Students and faculty at the inaugural New York Hot Jazz Camp pose for a group photo at Greenwich House Music School in May.

HAPPY CAMPERS

Musicians Bria Skonberg and Molly Ryan presented an Inaugural NY Hot Jazz Camp at Greenwich House Music School on May 17-22. NJJS Board member Pete Grice, who attended the camp with his soprano sax, reports:

"We had 38 campers, 13 faculty and directors, special guests and volunteers. Wycliffe Gordon, Cynthia Sayer and Ken Peplowski were feature lecturers and guests. The campers formed five bands and each were given a selection of jazz charts to practice. We had time to practice as a group, as well as private and sectional classes. The final camper concert was on Sunday afternoon at the Iridium, followed by the faculty concert at Birdland. When camp was over we all had a feeling of withdrawal as it seemed to go all too quickly. We had a mixture of talent and experience among the campers. Some were pretty familiar with jazz group performance and others were doing it for the first time. We all learned something and walked away with positive experiences. Camp directors Bria Skonberg and Molly Ryan were definitely elated on the success of the venture. Their dream certainly came true. Many of the campers were also sponsors during the initial Kickstarter campaign, so we also shared in the success of the program." J