

Jersey Jazz

Journal of the New Jersey Jazz Society

Dedicated to the performance,

promotion and preservation of jazz.

Volume 44 • Issue 10

November 2016



DO I KNOW YOU? If you saw a musician walking along Manhattan's West Side the last Sunday in September, there could only have been one place he was heading: The fourth edition of the New York Hot Jazz Festival. Bassist Andrew Hall brought to mind Dennis Stock's iconic shot of Bill Crow crossing Times Square as he made his way across Tenth Avenue on his way to the McKittrick Hotel. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

Retro's The Thing At 2016 New York Hot Jazz Festival

A nachronism reigned supreme as producer Michael Katsobashvili's vision of the hot jazz world of the 1920s and '30s came to life at the fourth annual New York Hot Jazz Festival — turning Chelsea's McKittrick Hotel into a costumed retro Disneyland for enthusiasts of early jazz and swing. Katsobashvili credited saxophonist Dan Levinson and his band, the Gotham Sophisticats, as being “the culprits” who “took me down the rabbit hole of hot jazz” during a performance at the Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel some five years earlier. Also tripping down that rabbit hole on September 25 was *Jersey Jazz* contributing editor Mitchell Seidel, who tells all in words and pictures on page 26.

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A Hot Time in The Old Town

Story and photos by Mitchell Seidel

It is a scene built as much on style as substance. Women dressed in clothes their grandmothers would find risqué and men looking as if they stepped out of a 1930s postcard.

Yes, anachronism reigns at the New York Hot Jazz Festival, where the audience comes as much for the mood as it does for the music.

The fourth festival was held at the McKittrick Hotel, a multi-storied performance venue that looks like it was designed to be a set for a latter day Woody

Allen movie or a musical by Kurt Weil and Bertolt Brecht: a roof garden dripping with small lightbulbs tops a building that includes a similarly decorated stage on a lower floor. Off a hallway are faux train cars that while usually serving as intimate dining rooms, serve as cute but cramped performance spaces.

Walking around the building you'd almost think you stepped back in time except...the audience members and the musicians all seem to have cell phones and the performances are amplified.



Producer Michael Katsobashvili, left of center, enjoys the attributes of Dylcia la Chatte as she recreates a trademark dance routine of Josephine Baker in the waning hours of the New York Hot Jazz Festival.

There were times you thought you'd stepped into an old Bill Gottlieb or Herman Leonard photograph, where cigarette smoke swirls around musicians wearing pork pie hats and audience members sip elegant cocktails. It's like a musical Disneyland for fans of swing and traditional jazz, with varying styles from stage to stage. There are chanteuses, tap dancers, a Josephine Baker imitator and an enthusiastic cheerleader in producer Michael Katsobashvili, whose shouts of "Opa!" could

be heard throughout the building.

Katsobashvili credited saxophonist Dan Levinson and his band, the Gotham Sophisticats as being "the culprits" who "took me down the rabbit hole of hot jazz" during a performance at the Oak Room of the Algonquin Hotel some five years earlier. His retro festival has grown into a unique event that managed to sell out this year, attracting everyone from hipsters to jazz enthusiasts to swing dancers. Despite the fact that one of the acts — the Xylopholks, featured a xylophone player dressed as a skunk and a pink gorilla (obviously related to Ernie Kovacs' Nairobi Trio) on bass, attendees weren't in danger of having a Betty Boop cartoon break out in real life. The music was all serious; only the spirit was light.



Trombonist Wycliffe Gordon pauses to catch some of pianist Aaron Diehl's soloing at the atmospheric McKittrick Hotel.



Cecile McLorin Salvant recalls the sound of an earlier era in her duo performance with pianist Aaron Diehl.



Harry James? No, it's trumpeter Mike Davis performing with Dan Levinson's Gotham SophistiCats featuring vocalist Molly Ryan at the New York Hot Jazz Fest.

This was no note-for-note rote recreation of the swing era, but rather musicians who respect its style and have the artistic ability to perform it and make it fresh. Listening to vocalist Cecile McLorin Salvant and frequent accompanist pianist Aaron Diehl, you'd swear you were back listening to a young Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan or Ella Fitzgerald. The music may have been Great American Songbook, but the delivery was as fresh as the morning. Diehl got quite a workout during the evening, also helping entertaining trombonist Wycliffe Gordon channel Satchmo in his "Pops for President" group.

Reedman Dan Levinson's Gotham Sophisticats with spouse Molly Ryan on vocals brought to mind some hot jazz combos of the 1940s and a little Louis Prima/Keely Smith as well. Trumpeter Mike Davis and trombonist Jim Fryer, standouts in that style, added greatly with their solos.

Multi-instrumentalist Dennis Lichtman and his Texas swing group Brain Cloud, featuring

Tamar Korn (alright, so there was a touch of Betty Boop there) played under a beautifully clear early autumn evening sky in the hotel's roof garden, Gallow Green. Also swinging under the stars was guitarist Frank Vignola's trio with the ubiquitous Nicki Parrott and fellow guitarist Vinny Raniolo. Trumpeter Brian Carpenter's Ghost Train Orchestra gave the audience a sampling of what put the jazz in the "Jazz Age" with his period performances of 1920s and 30s classics. For people who preferred their vintage music with the scratches intact, Michael Cumella, AKA DJ Mac, kept the prehistoric music flowing between sets with a pair of old (albeit amplified) phonographs and a stack of 78s.

It was nearly everything one could find for a step back in time without leaving the 21st Century.

The only things missing were bootleggers, bathtub gin and a secret knock for admission accompanied by the phrase, "Misha sent me."



Dan Levinson, left, Evan Christopher, center and Dennis Lichtman engage in a clarinet jam at the New York Hot Jazz Fest.



A faux railroad dining car serves as the intimate setting for (Jerron) Blind Boy Paxton's solo blues performance in a "secret stage" at the New York Hot Jazz Festival. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.



If they had DJs in the Roaring 20s, they'd undoubtedly look-- and sound-- like Michael Cumella, who spun the hot wax, er, shellac as his alter ego DJ Mac between sets at the roof garden of the New York Hot Jazz Festival.