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New Jersey expatriate Betty Camora takes to the microphone with her trusty all-purpose washboard as she sings at the poolside opening of the Suncoast Jazz Classic at the Sheraton Sand Key in Clearwater Beach, Florida on November 18, 2016. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

From Dixie To Doo-Wop It's All Good At The Suncoast Jazz Classic

Alongside its Dixieland roots the 26th Suncoast Jazz Classic, Florida's annual gathering of the jazz clans, made room for multiple other styles from swing to samba — with side trips to pop, rock and doo-wop along the way. The musical salmagundi had something for everyone, and with 20 bands performing at five venues over the sunny three-day weekend there was plenty of it. NJ Jazz Society music veep Mitchell Seidel has our exclusive report on page 26.

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

Swingin' On The Suncoast

Story and photos by Mitchell Seidel

Sun block? Check. Beach reading? Check. Bathing suit? Check. Clarinet? Check. Washboard? OF COURSE!

Yes, it always pays to be prepared when visiting sunny Florida, even if you might not be spending all your time at poolside with your hand around a fruit-filled drink. It just so happened that the 26th annual Suncoast Jazz Classic in Clearwater Beach on the November 18-20 weekend had sunny skies outside as well as sunny music inside.

Just as you should be prepared for anything when you hit the Tampa Gulf Coast area, that same rule goes for its long-running jazz party, which traces its roots to a Dixieland jazz event. There's still a good amount of trad jazz to be had, but the idea of "good time" music can extend well beyond that made with tuba, washboard and banjo.

As many of the same people attend the event each year, organizers take into account personal favorites of the audience. That, and the fact that many better-heeled Suncoast Jazz Classic board members and volunteers provide money to "sponsor" the attendance of soloists and groups, means that there are more than a few repeat performers.



There were some extra umbrellas at poolside at the Sheraton Sand Key as festival-goers mingled with the rest of the guests during a second line parade for the opening of the Suncoast Jazz Classic on Nov. 18.

This year's event would have to be considered clarinet-centric, what with the appearance of Benny Goodman clone Dave Bennett and youngish old soul Ken Peplowski. It is a credit to their talents as jazzmen, musicians and entertainers (no, not mutually exclusive groups) that they kept their respective repertoires fresh throughout three-plus days of performing. Some of Peplowski's jokes, though, may have been recycled.

In any event, the classic made ample use of both clarinetists, even finally having them perform together in a surprise collaboration on the last day.



The only time this pair played together was at the last Arbors Records Invitational Jazz Party about five years earlier, so clarinet kings Dave Bennett, left, and Ken Peplowski took the opportunity to team up on the last day of the 26th Suncoast Jazz Classic, in the same ballroom where they last performed.

Besides his Goodmansque looks and clarinet stylings, another reason Bennett is so popular on the jazz party circuit is his versatility. Where else can you get a spot-on rendition of "Sing, Sing, Sing" one set and then come back hours later and do an equally impressive "Great Balls of Fire" ala Jerry Lee Lewis.

An example was seen at the pre-party performance for festival benefactors, where Bennett presented a set that covered the spectrum from the big band era to doo-wop, starting with an up tempo "Avalon," proceeding into some New Orleans and then "Earth Angel" from his newest album of 1950s pop. Bennett's bag also includes Beatles chestnuts "Eleanor Rigby" and "Yesterday," lyrical 1960s pop tunes that are, face it, half a century old and have stood the test of time.

Saturday night the two clarinetists were playing different venues in the Classic's main hotel, the Sheraton Sand Key, but neither of them were playing that instrument. Bennett was devoting an entire set to his vocal and piano tribute to Jerry Lee Lewis while Peplowski reminded all within earshot that his tenor sax abilities put him in the range of a Zoot Sims.

If you still hadn't had your fill of licorice, there was always Joseph Midiri, the reed-playing half of the Midiri Brothers, who was in attendance with his vibist sibling Paul and their band. With trumpeter Dan Tobias in tow, their group presented a weekend's dose of small group swing from the 1940s.

On the more local scene guitarist Nate Najar, a Charlie Byrd devotee, and bassist John Lamb, a Duke Ellington alumni, were frequently seen around the event, most notably in a tribute to jazz samba. The two

were always wonderfully in sync, responding to each other's solos like they'd playing together all their lives.

Big band fans were sated by the appearance of trombonist Bill Allred's Classic Jazz Band, a collection of some of the region's best players performing arrangements of originals and swing era classics. It was something of a family affair for Allred, who celebrated his 80th birthday at the affair with his son John, also a trombonist in attendance along with granddaughter (and John's niece) Valeka Ramakis.

After observing a lineup so filled with swing, bop and beyond, you might have wondered whether traditional jazz had all but been removed from the event along with the word Dixieland. There was still plenty of that to go around as well. Fear not. A second hotel, the Marriott Suites Clearwater Beach on Sand Key had a good deal of its performance spaces reserved for the event devoted to the more traditional styles. Groups like Cornet Chop Suey and The High Sierra Jazz Band played older music and newly written tunes in the Dixieland style, but a sense that the music was brand new and not a museum piece.

Even non-attendees were not immune to the lure of jazz. The hotel bar at the Sheraton was turned into one of the venues for the Classic sans admission fee, so sports fans watching the big screen televisions there could get a dose of swing with their college gridiron action. And sunbathers around the Sheraton pool taking advantage of the warmer than usual November temperatures during the traditional kickoff of the event on Friday were serenaded by a New Orleans-style second line parade complete with tuba, washboard, banjos and parasol-toting ladies.

By Sunday afternoon much of the jazz had run its course and a good number of the attendees and musicians were making their way home or preparing to. Before kicking off his ultimate set of the event with "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To," Peplowski observed: "This is our 125th set of the weekend. If we had another set, Jerry Lewis would be up here with a tote board."



Acoustic guitar master Nate Najar, Duke Ellington band alumni bassist John Lamb and drummer Mark Feinman take the audience on a tour from "Swing to Jazz Samba" during a Saturday afternoon set at the Suncoast Jazz Classic.



Dave Bennett, left, and Doug Cobb lapse into an absurd stick fight for the skins as they close a set with "When the Saints Go Marching In" at the pre-fest benefactors' party at the Sheraton Sand Key.



Fans engage in some poolside boogie as they enjoy the sounds of the opening ceremony for the Suncoast Jazz Classic.

The Midiri Brothers, Joseph and Paul perform with trumpeter Dan Tobias, guitarist Bob Leary, bassist Jack Hegyia and drummer Jim Lawlor.

