

# JerseyJazz

Journal of the New Jersey Jazz Society

Dedicated to the performance,

promotion and preservation of jazz.

VOLUME 45 • ISSUE 8  
SEPTEMBER 2017



R&B/Gospel star Mavis Staples performs with guitarist Rick Holmstrom at the Xerox International Jazz Festival on June 28. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

## **Digging (for) Jazz in Upstate New York** *Sometimes you want to go with who you know*

By Mitchell Seidel

Finding jazz at a so-called jazz festival these days is a bit like looking for gold in 1840s California — good nuggets are there, but a bit of prospecting is required.

Nowhere is this more evident than at the Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival, where the definition of that four-letter term as been stretched to include rock, folk, blues and R&B. The nine-day event encompasses a massive schedule at some 14 venues in and around downtown Rochester. This is the festival whose musical

director, John Nugent, proudly proclaims “It’s not who you know, it’s who you don’t know.” Indeed, you’re equally likely to encounter a tunesmith from the Faroe Islands or a Toronto alt-rock trio as you are to find an American bebopper or swinging saxophonist. Fine if you have the time to pan through the nine-day schedule, but what if you don’t? Sometimes you want to go with who you know. Fortunately, they’re always on the schedule, and to no surprise, they’re also the best-

*continued on page 28*

# Digging (for) Jazz in Upstate New York

Story and photos by Mitchell Seidel

*continued from page 1*

attended shows.

Although Rochester charges fans for individual big-name performances and offers reasonably priced multi-day “club pass” tickets, the general outdoor scene, with free stages and pedestrian-friendly closed streets is one of buskers and big bands. Add to that a dozen or so food trucks and the early summer commerce from restaurants and shops in the region of the Eastman School of Music and you have a festival that appeals to both the baby boomer and the millennial. In its 16th year, it seems to have settled into a pattern that has local patrons less anxious to plunge for the full nine days but more apt to spring for three-day passes. Single-admission concerts with not necessarily big jazz names serve as headline attractions to attract the masses, which explains how the likes of Joss Stone, Sheryl Crow (sold out before the festival schedule was even printed) and King Crimson played Kodak Hall at the Eastman Theatre. Fortunately, the lineup also included a Ray Charles tribute with saxophonist Maceo Parker and longtime pop diva Mavis Staples.

The first weekend in June northern tier jazzers helped ebullient producer Frank Malfitano celebrate 35 years of the M&T Bank Syracuse Jazz Festival. (It should be stressed that the financial institution has a major hand in producing both events, being a naming sponsor for Syracuse and a “presenting” one for Rochester, quite an investment for one corporate entity). And while Rochester’s event requires tickets for some events, Syracuse is free.

In earlier years, the Syracuse festival took up several



Piano great Ramsey Lewis pauses to appreciate to playing of band members Henry Johnson, left and Joshua Ramos at the M&T Bank Jazz Festival in Syracuse on June 9.

streets in the downtown area, but has since decamped to the hillside campus of Onondaga Community College overlooking the city.

At 35, the event is less grand than it once was, but is no less popular. Always a tireless cheerleader for the local music scene, producer Malfitano’s photograph could be seen in more places than John Dillinger’s in Depression-era post offices, but with less notoriety. The mood this year was come and hang. Sponsors handed out tchotchkes and food trucks circled in the parking lot like Conestogas in a John

Ford movie. Since it was free (almost, \$5 per carload parking), you couldn’t complain if not everything was to your liking.

Ramsey Lewis’s Electric Band presented a set that harkened back to the days when his music made it to the mainstream pop charts. While he doesn’t play as much as he used to, he is extremely generous with his sidemen, particularly guitarist Henry Johnson, whose playing is a pleasure. The band was the penultimate group of the festival’s first night, preceding a fireworks display and an encore

performance by an act from the previous year, The Mavericks, a high energy Grammy-winning Miami-based rock-com-country group with an enthusiastic fan base.

The festival had its requisite Louisiana flavor with the inclusion of bluesman Marc Broussard and New Orleans’ Rebirth Brass Band, as well as guest emcee, Hurricane Katrina expatriate Michael “Mr. Jazz” Gourrier, a former WWOZ jazz DJ now plying the airwaves on WRIR in Richmond, Va.

If there was ever a band that



Hungry jazz fans in Rochester line up at one of the many food trucks that appear as often as musicians at upstate New York festivals.

fit the Syracuse mood of party with jazz, it's Asleep at the Wheel, a long-running country swing aggregation that helps keep alive the spirit of Bob Wills. There were some old-school standards ("I Can't Give You Anything But Love" and "Route 66"), a Louis Jordan and Thelonious Monk mash-up, a furiously-paced "Tiger Rag," a ripping rock ("Hot Rod Lincoln"), a little Boots Randolph-style tenor sax and some Roy Rogers (a finale of "Happy Trails").

Singer-songwriter-guitarist-producer Todd Rundgren, while a name brand in rock and roll, isn't one in jazz, yet he was the headline act in Syracuse this year. In the weeks leading up to the festival he was quoted as saying that people who like the current president shouldn't come to his shows. Not true. People who don't like preachy, pedantic lyrics should stay home. Still, it was interesting to see a quasi-legendary rocker jump about the stage and make a variety of costume changes.

Because of its sheer size, it's easy to find more mainstream music in Rochester during the course of an evening. Plus, bands sometimes play multiple nights at different venues, adding to their availability.

The multi-pianist 4 by 4 by Monk featured George Cables, Cyrus Chestnut, Benny Green and Kenny Barron paying tribute to the 100th birthday of the aforementioned Thelonious on two pianos. The nicely paced concert demonstrated how well the master's music has been absorbed into the jazz canon that four players of different generations can exchange ideas so seamlessly and humorously in a series of solos, duos and

ultimately, quartets. "Monk is one of my favorite ballad writers," said Barron, who some 30 years ago was part of the group Sphere, devoted to his music. "When you hear Monk, you know it's Monk," Chestnut said of the highly individual style.

In playing Monk's music, said Green, "I keep noticing things I never noticed before."

At a panel discussion following their first concert, the four were asked if "another Monk" was on the horizon. "I don't think anyone's going to be the next Monk," Cables said. "A genius like Thelonious Monk comes along every 200 years," added Green.

Monty Alexander was presented in different settings over successive nights. "It's great to have a job, ladies and gentlemen," he said to an overflow house before a trio set at the Eastman School of Music's Kilbourn Hall. The previous night he performed in solo recitals. "They call it solo piano, but I call it alone piano."

Reedman Bobby Militello, who added spark to Dave Brubeck's ultimate quartets, performed two sets at the Montage, a local club. As good as his alto sax and flute playing (and a little singing) were, it was fun to hear him reminisce about his time with Brubeck, which he called "some of the best years of my life...we toured the world."

"The most profound experience of my life I had with Brubeck," he said, adding that the pianist and his wife Iola "were the consummate statesmen."

With all the importing of talent Nugent does for Rochester, sometimes his best bands come from...Brooklyn. Taking over



Asleep at the Wheel's Eddie Rivers gets into the swing of things on tenor with band co-founder Ray Benson during their Bob Wills-inspired set in Syracuse.



"Say, did you hear the one about the four piano players?" Following their eight-handed tribute to Thelonious Monk pianists (l-r) Benny Green, Cyrus Chestnut, George Cables and Kenny Barron share a laugh backstage at the Lyric Theater during the Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival.



Former Dave Brubeck saxophonist Bobby Militello takes a pause from playing and demonstrates his singing ability with bassist Jim Coleman and drummer John Bacon Jr. at the Montage club during the jazz festival Rochester. Rounding out the quartet was Bobby Jones on piano.

*continued on page 30*

## NY JAZZ FESTIVALS

*continued from page 29*

the big tent venue for one night of the festival were Sammy Miller & The Congregation, whose music is equal parts avant garde, Spike Jones and good old fashioned jump band. It's got more than a bit of traditional jazz seasoned liberally with modern age theatricality, resulting in a lot of foot-tapping entertainment, no matter what your taste in jazz.

Another Big Apple import was the Django Festival All-Stars, a band that can usually be heard at Birdland's annual Django Reinhardt Festival. This summer they took their Gypsy music on the road for a one-month tour. They also performed in stately Kilbourn, but the range and expression of their music could have fared just as well on a less formal club stage.

Both festivals had their share of extracurricular activities. In Rochester there were free jazz programs around town during the daytime hours and at night after the stages and clubs shut down there was an organized jam session in a nearby hotel, less exciting than previous years in part due to a shift of venue from a lobby bar with a patio to a second-floor ballroom. In downtown Syracuse the local Onondaga County Historical society featured an exhibit of photographs from more than three decades of the jazz festival while up at the college campus a small festival of jazz films was held indoors afternoons before the live performances. In addition, an exhibit of jazz festival ephemera looked like Malfitano emptied his attic and scrapbooks for the occasion. Both events offered free performances by local jazz groups and talented youngsters.

By now, preparations for next year's festivals are well under way, complete with the usual annual tweaking that accompanies such planning. That said, perhaps a little more jazz from the mainstream could be heard from? **J**



While its walls are filled with instruments, its basement is filled with records. Rochester's House of Guitars is one of several go-to stops for musicians and fans in town for the jazz festival.



Brothers Pat, left and Joe LaBarbera perform with their quartet at the Montage club during the Rochester Jazz Festival on June 30. The next night they treated fans to their big band at the Xerox corporate auditorium.



Although they're best known for their annual appearances at New York's Birdland, The Django Festival Allstars took their Gypsy jazz on the road for a one-month tour this summer, including a stop at the Eastman School of Music's stately Kilbourn Hall for the Xerox Rochester International Jazz Festival. Entertaining the crowd are, from left: Pierre Blanchard, Samson Schmitt, Antonio Licusati, DouDou Cuillerier and Ludovic Beier.

— Photos by Mitchell Seidel