

JerseyJazz

Journal of the New Jersey Jazz Society

Dedicated to the performance,

promotion and preservation of jazz.

VOLUME 45 • ISSUE 10
NOVEMBER 2017



Jonathan Russell performed with guitarist Vinny Raniolo at JazzFeast on September 19. Photo by Lynn Redmile.

COMING OF AGE AT JAZZFEAST

A Former Prodigy Returns To Princeton

Jonathan Russell began to play the violin at age three and was already performing with trad jazz ensembles in New York City clubs by age seven. At nine he played the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival and two years later made his first appearance at JazzFeast, sitting in with Ed Polcer's group (inset photo).

As a teenager Jonathan received awards from the American String Teachers Association and the U.S. Embassy in Hungary. In 2010 he earned an honorable mention in the ASCAP Young Jazz Composer Awards for his composition "Danny's Groove," written in tribute to

the slain *Wall Street Journal* reporter and violinist Daniel Pearl.

Now 22 and a newly minted college grad, Jonathan returned to Princeton JazzFeast on September 19, this time a leader in his own right, and performed an impressive 10-song set with guitarist Vinny Raniolo. Russell, who's blossomed into a polished musician, played a five-string violin that he also used to great effect walking bass lines and comping chords when guitarist Raniolo soloed. The performance, which included two memorable Russell originals, and a crowd favorite "Besame Mucho," was a festival highlight.



Jonathan Russell at JazzFeast in 2006

More on JazzFeast on page 24.

JazzFest 2017 Is A Family Affair

“There’s nothing wrong with a little nepotism,” a happily corrupt big city mayor once said, adding an important caveat, “as long as you keep it in the family.” There’s a lot to be said for that. Maybe your cousin Bernie really is the best choice for Commissioner of Weights and Measures.

And you can’t fault artistic director Ed Polcer for booking his son for the 26th Princeton JazzFest. After all Ben Polcer is one of the busiest bandleaders working in New Orleans these days, and the star-packed pickup septet he led in Princeton pretty much stole the show. (Full disclosure, lest we be accused of pushing fake news, Ed did stress that Ben’s appearance was suggested by former Palmer Square marketing director Anita Freselone, who heard him play in New Orleans and was suitably impressed.)

The apple didn’t fall far from the tree and the trumpeter inherited a clean sound and swinging style from his father. Ben Polcer grew up surrounded by jazz. His parents owned Manhattan’s famed Eddie Condon’s club on West 54th Street, where his mother was the manager (and late night singer), his sister ran the coat room, and Ed worked the bar and led the house band (talk about all in the family). By age 18, Ben was pressed into service as a roadie for his father’s gigs and started to learn the business from the inside. He moved to New Orleans in 2007 to begin his own career. Starting out working for tips on Royal Street he soon became one of the leaders of the traditional jazz resurgence among the many young musicians in the city.

But Ben was third on the bill at JazzFest. First up, for at least the umpteenth time, was the D.C.-based Alan Dale’s New Legacy Jazz Band who first played here in 1992. Pianist Rick Eldridge in particular was in



“How about a hand for my dad!” JazzFest artistic director Ed Polcer sits in with son Ben’s group in Princeton on September 19. Photo by Lynn Redmile.

fine form, peppering energetic solos with eclectic quotes from tunes like “Tequila,” and doubling on banjo for a feisty “Sweet Georgia Brown.”

There followed the urbane Houston Person, resplendent in a blue seersucker suit and a rumpled bucket hat, who offered a lyrical and languid seven-song set. Patter in between tunes was kept to a minimum, as in there wasn’t any. That included song titles, but we did recognize “Since I Fell For You” and “Sunny” in the impeccably played mix.

So far, so good. But many in the crowd were still reading the Sunday papers, working crosswords and thumbing their smartphones. Clearly it was time for some excitement and Polcer and company were ready to bring it.



Houston Person performs at Princeton JazzFest. Photo by Lynn Redmile.

After an opening “Shine” Ben offered his first gritty vocal on “2:19 Train Blues.” “The one song they’d let me sing,” in his 18-year-old band roadie days he explained. Another energetic vocal followed on “I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate.”

Polcer’s supporting cast may all have been New York-based trad/swing players, but this music was all New Orleans — from its tuba bass bottom to its interweaving frontline horns, namely Brian Nalepka, clarinetist Dennis Lichtman and Jim Fryer on trombone. Dalton Ridenhour (piano), Justin Poindexter (banjo) and Rob Garcia (drums) rounded out the rhythm section.

“Everybody Loves My Baby” had a jungle drum and clarinet open before morphing into straight ahead swing, and then festival director Ed Polcer picked up his cornet to sit in on “Old Fashioned Love in My Heart.” This was jazz with its roots showing, reeling off tunes like “Beale Street Blues” and the Hot Fives’ “The Wild Man Blues.” That good old good one featured Jim Fryer’s soulful

trombone as the leader channeled the Armstrong vocal.

The group closed its set with a rousing “Panama Rag” that had the crowd on its feet. The bandleader seemed to share their enthusiasm, “All gigs should be like this!” he declared.

While this was Ben Polcer’s first appearance at JazzFest, Jonathan Russell, who followed him to the stage, had been here before — more than a decade earlier at age 11. Times have changed. The flowing blonde curls are darkened and trimmed and he’s added a rakish beard. He’s also grown into a very fine jazz violinist and composer and his set of duets with guitarist Vinny Raniolo was something special. Raniolo, playing a vintage archtop in place of his usual round hole guitar, is the perfect musical foil for the spirited young violinist. This duo make music that deserves a recording. (Arbors Records, are you reading this?)

Then came the Stan Rubin Orchestra to close the day with a musical homecoming. Mr. Rubin is a Princeton man (Class of ’55) and he started The Tigertown Five when he was a freshman there. The band played at the 1951 Princeton v. Navy game where Dick Kazmaier led the Tigers to victory. (The running back went on to win Princeton’s only Heisman Trophy that year).

Thus launched the Tigertown Five soon became the hottest college band in the country. In Stan’s senior year they sold out Carnegie Hall and he was signed to RCA Victor. He later graduated from Fordham Law School but eschewed legal practice to form a big band dedicated to playing swing music. Today Stan’s band still plays weekly at two New York City clubs, Wednesdays at Swing 46 and Saturdays at the Carnegie Club.

His band at JazzFest, turned out old school in matching shirts and ties, played a swinging program of big band music à la Goodman (“Let’s Dance”), Shaw (“Moonglow”) Rich (“Let’s Blow”) and Basie (“Hay Burner”), among others.

Ed Polcer is only the second artistic director in JazzFest’s 26 years, having replaced NJJS founder Jack Stine just a few years ago. But he clearly has the music programming knack and the 2017 edition was another big success. We wonder what he’s got in store for next year. If he wants to bring his family back, that’s okay by me. **□**

— Tony Mottola



“We’re gonna let these guys play some jazz here,” declared Princeton grad Stan Rubin who led a 12-piece swing band across the street from his alma mater at 2017 JazzFest. Photo by Lynn Redmile.



AND THEN THERE’S THE FOOD: After all, man and woman don’t live by jazz alone. The Tiger’s Tale Bar & Grill (shown above), which sells a ton of lobster rolls and barbecued clams, is just one of nearly 20 local restaurants that surrounded Palmer Square with enticing food stalls. Among the offerings were artisanal pizzas, crepes, soups, ramen, Indian food, sausage & peppers, burgers, hot dogs, and huge pans of simmering paella. You could miss a whole set just trying to decide what to eat next. Photo by Tony Mottola.