

JerseyJazz

Journal of the New Jersey Jazz Society

Dedicated to the performance,

promotion and preservation of jazz.

VOLUME 47 • ISSUE 2
FEBRUARY 2019



Many in the Chicken Fat Ball's audience at The Woodland in Maplewood on January 6 have been attending the event for decades, and they came out in force for this year's wintertime jazz picnic. Photo by John Hester.



SCHMALTZ SELLS

A Record Turnout for the Chicken Fat Ball

Despite a wink and a nod from a jazz friendly fire marshal, and adding several tables under the front of the stage, Chicken Fat Ball organizers had to turn away the last of the crowd that showed up at The Woodland on January 6. Those who squeezed into the vintage Maplewood venue experienced one of the best Ball's in recent memory. Our story and photo coverage begins on page 24.

THE CHICKEN FAT BALL *(and The Case of the Missing Clarinet)*

Photos by John Hester

Truth be told I was so taken with the all brass front line of Vaché, Reinhart and Allred that I'd forgotten Ken Peplowski was on the bill for this year's Chicken Fat Ball until he finally showed up midway through the second set. But more about that missing clarinet later.

The Ball's de facto bandleader, Warren Vaché, wielded his trumpet throughout the show leaving the cornet duties to Randy Reinhart, the two blending seamlessly interwoven lines with trombonist John Allred. The trio was also cooking up tasty "arrangements while you wait" (as Vaché put it) in brief stage left confabs during rhythm section interludes. And a dream team rhythm section it was. Chicken Fat favorite Rossano Sportiello was back in the piano chair after an absence last year and guitarist Frank Vignola returned on guitar for the first time since being sidelined by a near fatal ATV accident in early 2017. Nicki Parrott was back in her usual spot on bass, chipping in occasional vocals, while the multifaceted drummer Paul Wells, who had an impressive CFB debut here last year, was back for an encore.

Early on it was easy to see that Vignola hasn't lost a step, or a lick, and he stood out over the first three numbers, opening with a bang on "If Dreams Come True," lyrically bending and slurring notes in a bluesy "Sweet Lorraine" piano/guitar duet and getting leader Vaché's attention with a fiery solo on "Dinah" ("Take another one Frank!"). And he dazzled on his first set feature, "Jitterbug Waltz," a tune that lends itself to pizzicato playing and has been a favorite with guitarists, notably Charlie Byrd and Bucky Pizzarelli.



Chicken Fat Ball co-founder Al Kuehn borrowed a band name from the late Yank Lawson and dubbed this year's all-star group "The World's Greatest Jazz Band." A powerful all brass front line of Warren Vaché, Randy Reinhart and John Allred held the fort until clarinetist Ken Peplowski turned up mid-show.

John Allred's feature on Hoagie Carmichael's "Skylark," performed in honor of "trombone hero" Urbie Green who had died the day before, was a lyrical and moving tribute.

Ms. Parrott's first vocal of the afternoon, "A Kiss to Build a Dream On," was decorated by Vaché's melodious fills and delivered in a style reminiscent of Blossom Dearie, until her voice dropped low for a Satchmo-esque scat coda.

Speaking of Satchmo, the set closing "Struttin' with Some Barbecue" brought a wave of enthusiastic applause, during which Vaché stood statue still, afterwards explaining that he'd seen Bobby Short do the same after a performance at Café Carlyle, and telling young Warren, "you have to give them time to worship you."

After a brief break, Al Kuehn, the event's co-founder, took to the stage and

announced that business was so good for the sold out event that organizers were able to make a \$500 donation to the NJJS and add a bonus to the musicians' paychecks. With that good news the show continued and the band opened the second set with "Strike Up the Band," into which leader Vaché saw fit to insert some "Salt Peanuts." Randy Reinhart did double duty on "Old Rocking Chair's Got Me," following two choruses on trombone with one on cornet.

Nicki Parrott's declared that her next vocal recalled "me mum's favorite singer, Doris Kappelhoff" before offering "That Old Feeling," a song recorded by (among many others) the underrated Doris Day.

And then we learned from MC Vaché that the heretofore forgotten Mr. Peplowski had been sighted in the building. Moments later the sheepish looking clarinetist appeared on stage and quipped, "I can only stay five minutes."



That earned a “This better be good!” reply from Al Kuehn seated in the audience. (The event began an hour earlier than usual this year to accommodate Sportiello and Parrott who had to make a European flight later in the afternoon, and Ken apparently neglected to take the time change into account and booked an earlier gig in the city.)

Still in a rush from the need to get to town in a hurry the clarinetist took “Nobody’s Sweetheart Now” at a breakneck pace, dazzling listeners as he raced up and down his horn in a frenzy of notes. The souped-up tempo was no worry for Rossano Sportiello’s lightning quick right hand, which had been stealing the show for most of the afternoon. He raced right along; this was tour de force stuff. Peplowski made further amends with “I May Be Wrong (but I think You’re Wonderful).” The rest of the band returned for “Exactly Like You” and we finally heard the full power of that formidable front line

During the second break NJJS member Sheila Lenga took to the stage for the several 50-50 drawings that further fattened the Jazz Society’s take for the afternoon. After which our convivial MC invited us to “shut up and listen” by way of introducing a quiet and lovely but untitled Sportiello piano solo. This was followed by two more numbers from the band, and a beautiful “But Beautiful” from Frank Vignola, before leader Vaché held his index finger high in the air and mouthed silently “ONE MORE,” explaining, “See we got paid on the break, and now I have the power!”

If we wanted an encore this was it. And Strayhorn’s immortal “Take the A Train,” replete with a spirited trumpet/cornet duel, was a satisfying close to another memorable jazz afternoon at the Chicken Fat Ball.

Our advice? Get your 2020 Chicken Fat tickets early.



— Tony Mottola



Photos clockwise from top left: Frank Vignola, Ken Peplowski, Nicki Parrott and Paul Wells.

— More news from the CFB on next page

Turning Back the Clock for a Night of Jazz at Chester's Hillside Lounge

During his welcoming remarks at this year's Chicken Fat Ball, NJJS founding member Al Kuehn announced his plans to organize a one-time event at the Hillside Lounge in Chester to commemorate the origins of the Jazz Society and to pay tribute to its co-founder, Jack Stine, who died last June. We asked Al to share his plans and he sent us these notes:

As you know, the Hillside Lounge in Chester was the place where the New Jersey jazz revival started. It was after the first Chicken Fat Ball in the late '60s that Chuck Slate Sr. got a gig there and, along with Ed Polcer who was a regular in the band, played there every Friday and Saturday night.

At first, the audience was small, but after a year or so the word got out and it was packed every weekend.

As news about this success spread Chuck was able to get musicians like Bobby Hackett, Lou McGarity, Jimmy McPartland, Pee Wee Erwin and more to come and play.

Friendships developed among the audience which lead directly to the founding of the New Jersey Jazz Society.

Last summer I had the idea... "Wouldn't it be great if we could do a concert there."

There are still people around who played there, including Warren Vaché, Ed Polcer Allan Vaché, Randy Reinhart and others. So I went to Chester and met the Hillside Lounge's present owner, who happens to be the grandson of the original owner, and presented my idea.

He was on board! I then called Ed Polcer and he was really excited about the prospect of doing a concert there and was willing to help out.

We're planning on an event this May or June so keep an eye on *Jersey Jazz* for the announcement of our plans!

— Al Kuehn



SHOW ME THE MONEY: This year's Chicken Fat Ball turnout enabled organizers to make a \$500 donation to the NJJS. Shown above Society treasurer Mike Katz (3rd from left) displays the fat check. Joining him (from left to right) are: Chicken Fat Ball co-founder and NJJS founding member Al Kuehn, NJJS executive vice president Jay Dougherty and CFB co-founder Don Greenfield. Photo by John Hester.



Most of the Chicken Fat Ball audience has been attending the popular event for many years. Over time they've turned the event into an indoor jazz picnic and the room's table, as usual, were laden with a variety of beverages, snacks and buffet style feasts. Photo by John Hester.