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PROFESSOR CUNNINGHAM AND HIS OLD SCHOOL

The closing act strikes a pose at The Birchwood Manor in Whippany on March 26, from left, Daniel Foose, John Merrill, Adrian Cunningham, Paul Wells, Oscar Perez and Jon Challoner.

Photo by Lynn Redmile.

G'day Mates

...Waltzing Matilda?

An Aussie bandleader stirs things up at the Pee Wee Stomp.

See page 26.



Swing dancers Sallie Stutz and Jerry Flood take to the Grand Ballroom's dance floor.

Photo by Lynn Redmile.

Clarinets, Comedians...and All That Jazz at the Pee Wee Russell Memorial Stomp

Despite the famously dour demeanor of the event's namesake, the Pee Wee Russell Memorial Stomp has seen its share of would be standup comedians. Many longtime attendees can recall being prey to Ken Peplowski's topical schmaltz and Warren Vaché's in-tune deadpan asides. Even emcee Joe Lang has been known to stall for time with a "joke" or two.

So the Henny Youngman-like slew of one-liners that Adrian Cunningham let loose when he took the mic for the afternoon's closing performance was nothing new really. Neither were the jokes.

"What's the difference between a jazz clarinetist and a pizza? A pizza can feed a family of four!"

"What do you call a clarinetist without a girlfriend? Homeless!"

"What do you call a clarinetist in a suit? The defendant!"

Yes, these are also all trombone jokes.

Well, the jokes may have been a little stale but the Aussie reedman's repertoire was decidedly not. It's a good bet that the Old School's performance of "Waltzing Matilda" was a Pee Wee Stomp first. The song, Australia's unofficial national anthem, came with Cunningham's explanation of its mainly inscrutable lyrics, whereby we learned that a swagman is a hobo, a billabong is a pond, and a waltz is not a waltz. Fair dinkum to all that, I say.

Also off the beaten Stomp track was the band's inspired swing version of Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag." All of that is not to say that there was not some appealing standard fare from this outfit as well, including "Sunny Side of the Street" and "Down by the Riverside," both appropriately rollicking.



Jazz fan Fernando Nunez is usually seen in the front row at the Stomp. The Chilean native has been attending Society events since the summer jazz picnics at Waterloo Village in the 1970s. Photo by Lynn Redmile.



The bands, from top in order of performance: the Midiri Borthers Quintet, Dan Levinson's Russell of Spring Band, the Anderson Brothers Quintet, and Professor Cunningham and His Old School. Photos by Lynn Redmile.

When it came time for the much maligned, but here celebrated clarinet to shine, the young Cunningham was up to the task, paying homage to the great master Sidney Bechet with soulful renditions of “Chant in the Night,” “Egyptian Fantasy” and “Sidney Bechet’s Fantasy” which also featured a tidy guitar solo, all in paired notes, by John Merrill.

The opening Midiri Brothers Quintet had dancers on their feet early with some vaguely familiar swing tunes, although the muffled stage announcements were no help with titles. I did recognize “Love Me or Leave Me” which the brothers fired up nicely.

More brothers, the Peter and Will Anderson Quintet were up next, with a more recognizable repertoire, like an opening “Avalon,” tightly voiced horns in the lead. “Robbins Nest” with Will on flute featured an ear-catching, lowdown solo by guitarist Adam Moezinia. Clarinets got the feature for “Begin the Beguine” and “Creole Love Call,” with another bluesy solo by Moezinia. “Cheek to Cheek” with Peter on clarinet and Will on sax prompted a big reaction on the dance floor. In between tunes, we learned that the twin brother Andersons share a birth date with Pee Wee Russell (the next day, March 27) and that Will is 10 seconds younger than Pete. The indistinguishable brothers usually wear different colored suits to make identification possible, this day light gray (Will) and dark gray (Peter).

During a brief intermission Music Committee Chair Mitchell Seidel announced that 2017 Musician of the Year awardee Jon Faddis was flying at that moment back to the U.S. after performing in Germany and would receive his award at a later date. However, NJPAC President and CEO John Schreiber, the Society’s 2017 Jazz Advocate honoree, was in attendance and made graceful acceptance remarks, noting that “the first jazz I got to work on were the NJJS jazz picnics at Waterloo.” He also had kind words for Society co-founder Jack Stine, who he said “made me feel like I was part of the community.”

After the break, Stomp favorite Dan Levinson and his Russell of Spring septet took to the stage and opened with “Oh Peter,” a tune Pee Wee Russell recorded with Red Allen. Molly Ryan had the guitar chair and performed several vocals, including a lively “Where the Morning Glories Grow.” The set closed with a raucous “California Here I Come,” all hands blowing, and a droll vocal by bassist Bryan Nalepka.

Due to a technical glitch with a new ticket service for this year’s event, early ticket sale numbers were alarmingly slack. In the end there was a more than respectable crowd on hand on March 26, and a 49th Stomp in honor of the great Mr. Russell now doubt will be on again — same time next year! JJ

— Tony Mottola



Performing at the 48th Pee Wee Russell Memorial Stomp, clockwise from top left: Molly Ryan, Peter Anderson, Joe Midiri, Joe Hegyi and Dan Levinson. Photos by John Hester.

More photos on page 28.

Stylin' Hoofers At The Pee Wee Stomp!



Jennie Meares and Jim Geyer



Renee Toplansky and Victor Arencibia



Abril Anchondo Reynaga and Orian Marx



And away we go!
An exuberant Charleston jam circle.



Cindy Shamp and Linda Lobdell!



Sallie Stutz and Mario Ritualo

— Photos by Lynn Redmile