



Quarter Notes

Volume 3, Issue 4

October-December, 2008

P.O. Box 329
Somers Point, NJ 08244
609-927-6677
www.spjazz.org

Susan Ayres, Co-Editor & Design
Tim Lekan, Co-Editor
Jim Bonar, Contributing Editor
Barry Miles, Guest Columnist

Inside this issue:

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| George Mesterhazy | 1 |
| Upcoming Events | 2 |
| Sharon Sable | 4 |
| Sittin' In | 4 |
| Dennis Irwin | 5 |

A Little Bird Told Me...

(Overheard by our sax-playing seagull)

—The Somers Point Jazz Society is still seeking sponsors for our upcoming Cape Bank Jazz @ the Point Festival, March 5-8, 2009. If you are a business owner who would be interested, please contact us at 609-927-6677. Sponsorships start at \$500.

—Jazz Movie Night is coming up on Friday, Feb. 6, at Stumpo's Italian Grill. We will be showing the film 'A Great Day in Harlem'. For more details, call 609-927-6677.

A Conversation with George Mesterhazy

Editor's Note: A good part of the year pianist and arranger George Mesterhazy can be heard playing his Steinway piano at the Merion Inn in Cape May. However, on January 25th, 2009, at 7 p.m., the George Mesterhazy Trio will give a special performance at The Inlet Restaurant on Bay Ave. in Somers Point. Tickets are \$20 and all proceeds will benefit the Somers Point Jazz Society.

In early December 2008, bassist, SPJS Board Member, and longtime member of the trio, Tim Lekan, caught up with George and his father, Louie, for a lively and informative conversation at Louie's home in Somers Point. Here is their conversation:

Q: George, Could you talk about how you got started playing piano? Early on, did you have any teachers or mentors who were significant in your life?

George: Olga Buttle was a mentor in high school. She was the choir director (and music theory teacher) at Mainland Regional High School. She was a mentor only because she was such a great musician and also a fellow Hungarian. I enjoyed watching her playing through Beethoven sonatas backstage at school and just sight-reading through them with ease.

And then, even in my younger years, I connected with a lot of the Atlantic City regime of musicians. That included Vic Powell on sax, Joe Barrett on clarinet, Buzzy Wren on sax, John Tonielli on drums, Johnny Civera on drums, Eddie Matthias on bass, Sal Benigno on guitar, Stan Weiss on sax, Vic Garlitas on sax, and Bob Carter on piano.

Buzzy Wren had a profound influence on me. When I was around 18 years old, we lived in the same apartment building. He spent time teaching me Bill Evans' piano voicings, including his chord changes to 'Spring is Here'.



The George Mesterhazy Trio: Tim Lekan, George, and Bob Shomo

Buzzy and I became great friends...more like brothers. We helped each other out when we were short on money...helped pay each others rent. He also taught me how to cook corned beef hash to just the right amount of crispness and then crack an egg on top of it. And boy did that taste great!

John Guida (sax) was actually assistant teaching at Mainland High when I was there, and I remember hearing him play through John Coltrane's Giant Steps, and I thought - 'What the hell is that!?'

George Rabbai (trumpet) was a contemporary - he wasn't a mentor, but he was such a great player that he was an inspiration. We met when we were probably 16 or 17. I had a jazz gig in a club and he happened to wander in...it was like magic to play with him and it's been that way ever since. Now we're in the same college (Rowan University) teaching.

So that was my early mentoring.

Q: Did you know at the age of 16 or 17 that playing piano, playing jazz, was IT for you?

George: I didn't know that I was sure jazz would be it; I probably did, but I knew that music would be the rest of my life. I knew that... even younger than that. *(cont'd next page)*

(cont'd from page 1) Even at 5 years old - my parents knew it... I knew it.

Right, dad?

Louie: (Nods his head in agreement... laughter from George and Louie)

Q: Did you have a piano teacher at that early age?

George: No.

Q: How did you learn?

George: I learned from different friends... one or two things here and there, and then when my parents bought a Thomas Organ, before we got our big Wurlitzer; I got six free lessons with that. The teacher wasn't very good but I learned how to play 'Ida Sweet as Apple Cider,' and I played it well. I still can play it the same way I learned to play it then.

(George sings -' I - da, sweet as apple ci - i - i - der.') So that's what I learned from that guy. He was amazed that I learned it the first lesson

Q: And how old were you then?

Louie: 9.

George: 9 or 10. And then, you know, a lot of growing up with music was not about American jazz as much as that my mother was a good singer...my father was a good singer. I learned all of the Hungarian songs, Polish songs, German songs, polkas, and played accordion sometimes; I also played violin...My father said I was good (on violin). I think I was lousy, but he said I was good.

And then when I was 12, the Beatles came out, and I didn't think there was anything

more important than listening to the Beatles.

Louie: That's one of the times where you changed...

George: ...Right...from the violin...I didn't want to play violin. I wanted a Beatle haircut, and I wanted to play guitar.

Q: OK. So those were early mentors, teachers and influences.

George: That's right. My mom was really more my mentor than anybody, because she sang the music to me. I learned how to deal with it by ear. Then I had to educate myself about the harmony. (George sings part of a Hungarian song). There wasn't anyone for me to learn that from, other than maybe a record that my mother had. That was good for me, because just like that, or learning Silent Night, I had to really discover harmony on my own, and make friends with it. So that was probably when I was 11 or 12.

And then, I was never far from my guitar. I loved playing my guitar. I also liked playing accordion, and I loved playing piano.

Q: When did you start playing professionally?

George: I was semi-professional, I guess, when I was 11 or 12, with my mom.

Louie: That's it. That's it. Yeah.

George: I made money every New Year's eve...I had special holidays when I went out and giggered with my mom and...

Q: Your mom was doing singing gigs?

George: Well my mom sang great, yeah.

Louie: And George was one of the best accordion players...

George: I was OK. I was good, but my mother was great. She was literally (pause)...if she sang a song...like in Hungarian we have a Halyato, which is a ballad. If my mother sang a ballad, you were gone! That was all there was to it. She wasted the room. So she almost was like a Hungarian Shirley Horn. She was almost a predictor of what my future would be, by her style. Everybody I was attracted to the most, in my later years, was like my mom. Because she was passionate...she wasn't afraid to go to the dark side and be sad sometimes about her music. So that 'thing' that Shirley Horn had, my mom had.

It was like it was inevitable. It's amazing when I look back on it now to see how my history was painted already...My mother had it. She could tear you up. Right, dad?

Louie: Yep.

George: I remember there was one day; my mother already was in the beginning stages of Alzheimer's, and was afraid to start singing. My parents had just renewed their wedding vows. I wanted everything to be a perfect day for my parents, and it didn't turn out to be a perfect day. So then I went to the piano (at the Merion Inn) and I started to play, and my mom... (George snaps his fingers) was on it as soon as I played one of her intros of what she knew. It was so beautiful! And we were all a mess...crying. It was beautiful.

That's how much--music is so engrained in our family genes...that my mother...I don't think she was even sure what her name was sometimes, but she knew her songs. It was incredible!

Anyway, that was that chapter. So do you want me to keep going?

Q: It's fascinating to hear the connection between your experience accompanying your mom, and later on accompanying Shirley Horn.

George: I see it very clearly now.

Q: George, could you talk about your experience playing with Shirley Horn?

(cont'd next Page)

Upcoming Events

January 17, 2009

The Blue Moon Brewery Third Annual Winter Jazz Series

Organist Luke O'Reilly and his Quartet. 8 P.M. at The Inlet, 998 Bay Ave.

Bassist Andy Lalasis and Friends. 8:30 P.M. at Gregory's, 900 Shore Rd.

Jazz Society members and high school and college students with a valid ID are admitted free. All others will be charged \$10 at the door & this provides admission to both venues.

January 25, 2009

A Very Special Evening of Music: The 1st Annual SPJS Benefit Concert

With the George Mesterhazy Trio

Sets at 7 & 8:45 P.M. at The Inlet, 998 Bay Ave.

Tickets \$20 at the door or in advance—call 609-927-6677

(cont'd from page 2) What are the qualities that make her so highly regarded and respected by EVERY musician?

George: She is one of the highest level musicians...

(Loud sound from Louie's computer starting up)

George to Louie: "Are you happy now?" (laughter from everyone)

George: I think that Shirley and Miles Davis were the two greatest of the musicians that were compared a lot to each other. And rightfully so, because both had such a strong influence on each other; you couldn't tell where one started and where the other left off. So Shirley Horn was to singing and piano playing, what Miles Davis was to trumpet. They were both masters of economy and space. They were both the best at being able to make you wait - I don't care if the space was 60 seconds long. You were not going to take a breath until you heard the next note. They had mastered that art, and to me that's one of the greatest arts about music - how you use space, not fill it. And they were the two best.

That's what affected me. I loved accompanying and that's what I thought she was great at. I think I'm a good jazz pianist, but I think I'm even a better accompanist. And I love doing it. I don't think I'm taking a backseat when I'm accompanying.

Shirley had such a command of space, but it wasn't just a command of space. I learned a lot from her... I'm a better performer because of her. What I learned about is having this confidence about what decisions you make... You believe in what you do? Make your decisions.

She really had such courage. You know, not everyone was nice to her when she was coming up.

Q: Did Shirley ever give you any instructions, feedback, or input about how to accompany her?

George: No. The only time she ever said anything to me that was constructive, was the first day we played at Symphony Hall in Chicago...the first gig. We were rehearsing 'Here's To Life', and she came over to me, and I think I was just nervous. And she came over to me and very



Clockwise from top L: Ed Howard, George Mesterhazy, Steve Williams, Shirley Horn, Ahmad Jamal, and Roy Hargrove

quietly, so nobody else could hear, she said (whispers) "Could you play a little less?"

And through the times that we worked together, the only other criticism I got from her, and they were never negative; they were never meant in a negative way...we disagreed on one point. I thought my responsibility was always to stick to her chord changes because they were part of what made up her sound. And she tried to get me to start changing things to the way I would want them. She would say, 'George, I'd like to hear more George, not me.' And I used to tell her 'yeah, but you can hear George on your changes.'

So we had a little, very friendly battle. She really respected my judgment. She was always very kind about anything we talked about music.

Anybody who knows anything about piano or harmony knows her chords are unique. If you want an example, get the album with Carmen McRae singing and Shirley playing for her. You know that record? It's Carmen McRae - it's called "Dedicated to You - A Tribute to Sarah Vaughn." When Sarah died - Carmen sang, and Shirley played with her trio. It was one of Shirley's favorite records. And all

they did was call keys and do tunes in the studio... Great record! And it gives you an idea of what a great accompanist and a player Shirley is. 'Cause there's a Shirley sound, and I respected that sound, and I knew that sound for so many years.

I don't think anybody could play a ballad better. She really did have it all. What a great mentor to have.

Q: I'll have to find that recording. Could you name some other great recordings... Recordings you can listen to over and over, and not get tired of?

George: Here's To Life (Shirley Horn).

Q: Any others you want to add to that?

George: Here's To Life, Kind of Blue (Miles Davis)...anything by John Coltrane...anything! Anything by Bill Evans, and anything by Miles Davis.

Q: Could you name a memorable live performance you have seen?

George: Actually the most recent was Terry Silverlight's band with Barry (Barry Miles on piano) at the Cutting Room in New York. That was really memorable because the writing and playing were phenomenal.

Carmen McRae live at the 500 Club years

(cont'd next page)

(cont'd from page 3) ago...and anytime I saw Frank Sinatra and also Ella Fitzgerald live, which were a lot. I used to go to Sinatra's rehearsals. I knew everybody in the band at the time, and I worked at Resorts, and I knew all the hosts. I had worked all the rooms in Resorts so as long as I had my tux on, I could go anywhere. I saw Johnny Carson on New Year's Eve - the only time you'd ever see him in a nightclub performance, and it was phenomenal. Believe it or not, I'd have to say one of the best things I ever saw was Dolly Parton on New Year's Eve at Resorts. She was just great!

Tony Bennett...Sarah Vaughn at the Claridge..Mel Torme at the Claridge. I think I've seen everybody that's great out of that era...Sammy Davis many times...I got to work with Anthony Newley the last two years of his life. I am so thankful to have worked...it is such an honor to have worked with one of the most amazing

people I will never forget for the rest of my life. You could only have appreciated it, had you been at a concert...NOT on a record, but in a live performance. People never get what Newley was about, because they never saw him live. It was great! That was one of my favorite gigs I ever did in my life.

Q: What was so special about him?

George: Well, he was one of the funniest people I've ever rehearsed with. He was one of the most brilliant people I've ever been around. His music was hard...everything that he had done around him was at the highest level...orchestration...There was nothing that ever lowered the bar...it was always 'what is the highest that you can get?' Sammy Davis was the same way...had George Rose conducting, and George Rose wrote great ...great charts!

Q: George, is it true that when you bought your Steinway piano, you were debating whether to buy a house or buy the piano?

George: (laughs) that's the truth. I was really on the fence. I bought that piano in 2000. Do you know how much good real estate was available in Wildwood at that time--Which I could have bought?

But I didn't do it. You know what? I don't ever feel sorry I did it. That's what I love. I don't need to own a house.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to say about the benefit concert at the Inlet on January 25th? What can the audience expect?

George: What they can expect from the trio is not to expect anything other than spontaneous interaction.

Tim: Thanks George.

George: You got it!

Sharon Sable Heats it Up at Stumpo's

By Jim Bonar

It may have been a cold and rainy December night outside, but any bad weather blues were chased away by the talented vocalist and her stellar trio inside. That talented vocalist is Sharon Sable, and she did her thing at Stumpo's as part of the Blue Moon Brewery Winter Jazz Series. In spite of lousy weather and the collective fear that economic Armageddon may be lurking around the next corner, the SPJS members and friends and others who were obviously Sharon Sable fans showed up in droves. Those arriving midway through the first set were hard-pressed to find a seat in the large room.

A trio of outstanding and supportive jazz musicians, each one a prolific and uniquely talented performer, delighted the audience and frequently seemed to delight Sharon Sable too. Pianist Bill McGrady is a fixture on the Cape May jazz scene. Bassist Mike Boone, from the Philadelphia area, has worked with Buddy Rich, Clark Terry, Mose Allison, and many others. Paul Jost, on drums for this occasion, is well known for his vocal work with the Ant Farm Quartet and as a composer.

Sharon performed a fast-paced first set that included a baker's dozen plus one.

The songs ranged from Bossa Nova to standards, and featured cool stylings that experimented with melody and tempo. Included were Antonio Carlos Jobim classics "Corcovado (Quiet Nights Of Quiet Stars)" and "Meditation", several songs from Billie Holiday's later swing sessions including "Comes Love (Nothing Can Be Done)" and "All or Nothing at All". A lovely rendition of the infrequently performed song "'Tis Autumn" and swinging and bluesy interpretations of "Gee Baby Ain't I Good to You" and "Fever" were highlights of the first set.

Watch for Sharon Sable's appearances in the area. She is drawing crowds and sending them home happy.



Sharon Sable

Sittin' In

Special Guest Columnist, Barry Miles

I'd like to express a few thoughts about the local community of jazz artists and its relationship to the Somers Point Jazz Society. I've been a full-time professional musician practically my whole life. I joined the musicians' union in 1956 at age nine, have been fortunate enough to sustain a career solely in music since college, and have played and

collaborated all over the world with some of the greatest jazz artists of our time.

Having traveled to the region for many years, and having lived in South Jersey for the past three years, I've observed that this area has a disproportionately large amount of great jazz talent. Perhaps it's partially because of the proximity to the traditional jazz centers of NYC, Newark (NJ), and Philly, and the

(cont'd next page)

(cont'd from page 4) historical jazz attraction of Atlantic City during its heydays. For whatever reason, many of these "local" jazz musicians and singers (some internationally known) are, in my opinion, just as good, if not better, than many of the household jazz names. In other words, these people are world class.

I am not yet a SPJS member and I feel I'm being objective when I say, to its credit; SPJS does not ignore or take these local artists for granted. It regularly features local jazz artists at its festivals and concerts and doesn't take the easy way out (like some other jazz organizations do); by hiring a big name to get the big draw. I believe, by nurturing, exposing, and pro-

viding venues to South Jersey's unique and extraordinary talent, SPJS will itself be the "big draw" and the household names will be knocking on the door to be a part of such a prestigious and successful festival. It's kind of a grassroots approach that I think will grow because of the high quality of the homegrown product.

I think it's important for SPJS to continue to promote itself in the media and to expand its exposure outside of the South Jersey area. NY, PA, and North Jersey should definitely know what's going on. Also, I hope SPJS continues to provide venues for new, up and coming artists and ones that have been around for a

while, but, for whatever reason, have not been given, or have not taken the opportunity to have their great talents properly exposed. Finally, I think it's important that SPJS continues to take the responsibility to find and provide the funds to compensate the performing artists well for their unique and valuable services.

Barry Miles 12/11/08

Editor's Note: Barry Miles is a world-renowned pianist and drummer. He is one of the founders of fusion music, and served as Roberta Flack's Musical Director for 15 years. Barry has composed hundreds of musical scores for television, radio, and film, and can be heard on many pop, R&B, and jazz recordings.

Dennis Irwin

November 28, 1951- March 10, 2008

By Tim Lekan

On Monday February 18, 2008 I drove into Manhattan with a good friend. We were on our way to the Village Vanguard to hear the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. Dennis Irwin, who played bass with the band almost every Monday night since the early 1980s, was battling cancer and that night was a fundraiser to help Dennis with his medical expenses.

It was a memorable night for several reasons. Of course the music was great - the band is made up of some of New York's finest jazz musicians, and on that particular evening John Scofield and Joe Lovano were special guest artists. Dennis was not present and the bassist who subbed for him that night, Doug Weiss, sounded beautiful. Scofield and Lovano are two of my favorite musicians and they did not disappoint.

However, what I remember most about that evening is when John Mosca, trombonist and co-leader of the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra spoke. After thanking everyone for coming out to support Dennis he said "You know, in all the years Dennis has played with this band, there isn't one measure he played where he wasn't taking care of somebody."

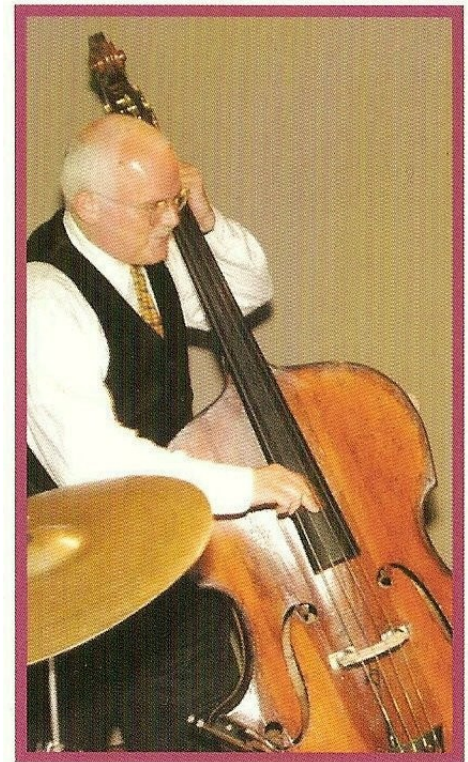
Perhaps it's worthwhile to read those

words again. To me, it's about the highest praise one can give a fellow musician.

Dennis has a huge, earthy sound, a deep groove, great ears - and he listens and supports the music - always. But don't take my word for it. Check out any of the more than 500 recordings he's played on. Dennis has played in bands led by some of the greatest jazz musicians on the planet, including Art Blakey, John Scofield, Joe Lovano, and Johnny Griffin. Any of their recordings with Dennis would be a good starting point to appreciate what he brings to the music.

When I lived in Manhattan in the late 1990s, I had the good fortune to take a few bass lessons with Dennis. He would actually ride the subway with his bass and the lesson would take place in my apartment. It was unusual and very generous. After a few jokes (Dennis always had a few) and a cup of coffee, we got down to the task at hand.

It was always about the fundamentals - practicing scales and bass lines with the bow...working on playing in tune, in time, developing a sound, playing good, consistent, supportive bass lines. It was reassuring to know that Dennis, after all he had accomplished in his musical life, was still focusing on these fundamentals in his own practice.



Dennis Irwin

I feel blessed to have known Dennis, to have taken some very memorable and invaluable lessons with him, to have heard him play live on many occasions, and to continue to listen to him every day on recordings. For me, he is a constant source of inspiration and joy, and a great example of what it means to listen deeply and always support the music.

Thanks Dennis.