History Isn’t Over:

Jazz @the Point Festival Shines Spotlight on South Jersey’s Special Relationship with the Hammond Organ

By Matt Silver

If you’ve spent enough time down the shore and have any inclination towards music or history, you’ve heard about Kentucky Avenue, the way it used to be, when everything was better. When bars and restaurants and clubs lined the famed corridor between Atlantic and Arctic Avenues that in-the-know locals called “Ky and the Curb.” When black and white audiences alike queued up on Saturday nights, dressed to the nines, to see and hear Billie, Ella, The Duke, The Count, Dizzy and Art Blakey, Sam Cooke and Jackie Wilson.

Kentucky Avenue isn’t much to look at or listen to or breathe in today. But back then, it was a multi-sensory experience: according to some of the legendary old heads, the live music was…alive. It would walk right out the front door of its club of origin, and as soon as you turned the corner onto the Avenue, it would take up residence inside your person with daemon-like efficiency.

South Philly’s Charles “The Mighty Burner” Earland described the scene, thusly, in one of the last interviews before his death: “…We had a certain kind of walk in those days anyway, man, and as soon as you’d hear them organs on Kentucky Avenue you’d go into your hop walk! You’d start to struttin’ with the groove, man, because you could feel the pulse all the way a block away.”

If you were a young jazz musician looking to gig, looking to learn jazz musicianship from the best, and make a name for yourself, the scene, especially in the summertime, wasn’t necessarily in New York, and it wasn’t back in Philly (though so many of the cats you’d see playing on KY Ave. were Philly cats)—it was in places like Club Harlem and Grace’s Little Belmont; it was in the Paradise Club and the Wonder Garden, the High Hat and the Glass Hat.
As reliably as the snowbirds boomerang back to Downbeach after the requisite six-months-and-day in Palm Beach County, that’s how reliably the Philly jazz scene shifted down the shore come summer. Philadelphia was producing more great jazz musicians per capita than just about anywhere else; innovations credited to Philly reverberated throughout the jazz world. The "Philly sound”—that meant something. And in the early to mid 50s, a complex, cumbersome instrument once thought reserved for churches, ballparks, and skating rinks became indispensable to the Philly sound. The instrument was the Hammond B-3 organ, and the man responsible for making Philadelphia “The Jazz Organ Capital of the World” was Jimmy Smith.

But the concept of Jimmy Smith as we know it today—what Jimmy Smith was to become, his long line of protégés, the evolution of the organ’s place in bebop—might never have come to be if what he saw and heard in Atlantic City hadn’t changed the course of his career.

The young Jimmy Smith from Norristown had been playing piano professionally but was frustrated with pianos that were perpetually out of tune and also wanted an instrument that could better voice the improvisational lines of the bebop horn soloists he admired, like Charlie Parker. So when Jimmy Smith came to Atlantic City in 1953, he was still searching for his sound. It was only then, after hearing Wild Bill Davis play the B-3 at Club Harlem, that Smith said “That’s for me.”

The rest really is history. Smith took the foundation laid by Wild Bill Davis and Bill Doggett and, atop it, built Xanadu. He may have satisfied the criteria for sainthood in the process—he took one instrument and miraculously made it sound like three.

Soon the whole Philly scene was playing the same way. And they all either learned from Jimmy Smith or from someone who learned from Jimmy Smith.

South Philly’s Charlie Earland (whose South Philadelphia High School dance band included Lew Tabackin on tenor sax, Earland on baritone sax, and Frankie Avalon on trumpet!) picked up organ while he was playing tenor sax in Jimmy McGriff’s band during summers in Atlantic City. Which might never have happened if Jimmy McGriff, of Germantown, hadn’t been entranced, and subsequently taught, by the organ player at his sister’s wedding. Camden’s own Richard “Groove” Holmes. Holmes, like Earland, came to organ from another instrument, without any prior piano training. And the Groover, of course, would not have been the player he became without having studied with—you guessed it, the paterfamilias himself, Jimmy Smith. In truth, Smith taught them all, both directly and indirectly, at one point or another.

So did Atlantic City. The Mighty Burner, Charlie Earland, said before he passed that even his star-studded high school ensembles weren’t the proving ground that Atlantic City was. He told Downbeat and JazzTimes writer Ted Panken, back in 1998, “I got all my real street training from Atlantic City and places like that.…”

This isn’t lost on the organ players who will be headlining this year’s Ocean First Bank Jazz @ The Point Festival. Over three nights during the second week in October (which real shore locals know to be the loveliest time of year), some of the best, most celebrated performers in contemporary organ jazz will be showcased across three venues in Somers Point.
It will be a weekend to pay homage to the monumental role this area played in the development of the idiom, and it will also be a weekend to showcase the versatility of today’s best players, who will no doubt show us that the history of the Hammond organ is far from over.

**Joey DeFrancesco**, widely regarded as the best Hammond organ player on the planet, and this year’s headliner among headliners, is a Philly guy—a graduate of Philadelphia’s High School for the Performing Arts, where his friend and classmate was jazz bass mega-star Christian McBride. It was with McBride, playing in the house band for a local Philly TV talk show called Timeout, that a young DeFrancesco caught the attention of Miles Davis. Davis, a guest on the show that day, turned mid-interview to the show’s host, Bill Boggs, and asked, “What’s your organ player’s name?”

Fast forward a few months to the Summer of 1988: Joey DeFrancesco is touring with Miles Davis, missing the first two months of his senior year of high school to play jazz (or whatever it was that Miles was playing in those days) with the man who birthed the cool. He cut the tour short only because Columbia signed him to a record contract and wanted him to come home to start recording. He was 17 years old.

Though Kentucky Avenue’s heyday was a little before his time, Joey’s father, Papa John DeFrancesco, a heck of an organ player in his own right, played at both Club Harlem and Grace’s Little Belmont. All those progenitors of the jazz organ, the Philly Sound, mentioned above—“He played with all those cats,” says DeFrancesco of his father.

Over thirty years later, it’s DeFrancesco who plays the Miles Davis role, looking and listening for the best new sound—“It’s a wonderful feeling to mentor young talent,” says DeFrancesco, who values brevity away from the bandstand.

Making your way into Joey DeFrancesco’s orbit is a very, very good career development if you’re a young jazz musician. Dan Wilson, a young guitar player from Akron, OH is one of my personal favorites—“He brings such a great vibe.” The list goes on and on, from Pat Bianchi to a Philly-based organist named Lucas Brown who will essentially be opening for his idol, Joey DeFrancesco, at this very jazz festival.

**Lucas Brown** is a name you should know, if you don’t already. Not even 40, he’s been playing with Bootzie Barnes’ organ trio since he was 21, is a member of Temple’s jazz studies faculty, and just played the massive pipe organ inside Verizon Hall alongside the Jazz Orchestra of Philadelphia, directed by Terell Stafford and featuring none other than…Joey DeFrancesco.

Brown’s played since the early 2000s with Three Blind Mice, an organ trio led by Philly-based saxophonist Victor North. North, as it happens, would almost certainly have been a part of the band Brown is bringing to Somers Point, except that North will be playing with, who else, Joey DeFrancesco, later in the evening, just a couple hundred yards away.
In North’s place will be a young Philly saxophonist who really cooks by the name of Sam Greenfield (On the advice of saxophonist Michael Pedicin, I caught Greenfield playing at Gregory’s a few months ago, and I’m glad I did—the kid is sensational). Rounding out Brown’s septet—that’s right, septet!—are Elliot Bild (trumpet), Nick Lombardelli (trombone), the great Behn Gillece (vibraphone), Sean Markey (guitar), and Doug Hirlinger (drums).

The big man himself—Joey D—will preside over the weekend’s Main Event, a phrase that calls to mind DeFrancesco’s tribute album to Jimmy Smith, The Champ, where Joey is pictured on the album’s cover in full robe and boxing gloves. While Joey D will probably be dressed more conventionally this time around, his band will not be without a couple of hometown heavyweights: Khary Shaheed, a young, in-demand drummer whose star is on the rise joins DeFrancesco, as does the aforesaid saxophonist Victor North, whose thirty-plus years living and playing in Philadelphia has turned the Anchorage, Alaska transplant into one of organ jazz’s most ardent ambassadors.

North is the perfect saxophonist to play alongside an organist because he’s mastered the subtle and elegant dynamic of simultaneously playing both inside and outside the multiple parts being played by the organ. He credits Sonny Stitt’s dialogue with Jack McDuff on 1962’s Stitt Meets Brother Jack and Joe Henderson’s interplay with Larry Young on the latter’s Unity as indispensable models for how to speak this particular type of musical language.

On the contrary—Bianchi credits Joey D. with bringing the organ’s popularity and viability back from the brink. As the golden age of the organ trio gave way to the 70s and 80s and the attendant ubiquity of synthesizers, the boogaloos, blues, and shuffles that comprised the core of organ jazz’s sound to that point had lost freshness. Bianchi will tell you that the guy most responsible for bringing the organ back, so to speak, is Joey.

“He was just able to play in so many different contexts and varying tempos: bebop, hard-bop, fusion, Latin, covers…and not just Jimmy McGriff tunes,” says Bianchi. Pat then quickly adds, “Though, of course, he’s got all those, too.”

**Pat Bianchi, perhaps the leader of the “new-guard”**
Much like how all the mid-to-late-century organ players were branches off the Jimmy Smith tree, this new generation—young guys like Bianchi, Brian Charrette, and Jared Gold, and even younger guys like Ben Paterson and Brian Ho—represents the verdant outgrowth from the Joey D. tree. Both are august redwoods, and DeFrancesco is the sturdy suspension bridge spanning and uniting the two.

That’s why Bianchi feels the organ currently has the traction to remain a relevant, viable part of the contemporary jazz landscape for the foreseeable future. “I don’t see it waxing and waning with the rise of the next Yamaha DX-7 or Roland D-50,” said Bianchi when I spoke with him recently. “Because as great as some of the older guys were, the younger guys are more versatile than ever before.”

So when people tell Bianchi they think of him in the same breath as DeFrancesco, that’s something Pat leans into. He’s not shy about telling you that DeFrancesco’s been among his most important mentors. Bianchi told me it was this concept, mentorship—the quality of it and the availability of it—that he most closely associated with jazz and the musicians in our area.

“It’s not necessarily that New York is more competitive,” Bianchi says. “But Philly—when it comes to mentorship—is like an elite private school, whereas NY is more like an overcrowded public school, where there might not be as many mentorship opportunities simply because the teacher/student ratio isn’t as favorable.”

Class will be in session with Professor Bianchi (a member of Temple’s celebrated Jazz Studies faculty) on Friday night October 11th from 7:30-9pm at Gateway Playhouse. He will not be in need of any borrowed erudition, as drummer Byron Landham (also on Temple’s faculty) will join, as will Paul Bollenback (guitar), and Joe Locke, arguably the best vibraphonist in the world right now. Not surprisingly, Bollenback and Landham are longtime Joey DeFrancesco collaborators. It really is all in the family with these guys.

**Pat Bianchi Quartet: Friday evening October 11th, 7:30-9pm, Gateway Playhouse**

**Akiko Tsuruga** and her quartet will open this year’s festival with a Thursday night performance at Josie Kelly’s. Coming to us from New York City by way of Osaka, Japan, Akiko’s released ten albums over the past decade, each consistently in the top ten of the jazz charts. A protégé of the gumtural Dr. Lonnie Smith, Akiko has also recorded and toured extensively with Blue Note legend, alto-man Lou Donaldson.

Joining Akiko on the gig is one of the world’s best trumpet players, to whom she just so happens to be married—Joe Magnarelli. Not a bad first-call trumpet. Joe Mags is another one who’s served as an adjunct in Temple’s Jazz Studies program. This Terell Stafford fella seems to have some pull.
On drums will be Carmen Intorre, Jr., who’s originally from Buffalo but is certainly no stranger to the Philly jazz organ milieu. You can find fine examples of Carmen’s more recent work on both Pat Bianchi’s and Pat Martino’s latest albums, and he’s said that getting that call to play with Pat Martino has been the biggest thrill of his professional life. How’d he end up with the gig? How else? By playing with Joey DeFrancesco!

Intorre, Jr. found himself playing alongside Joey DeFrancesco in 2012 when Joey D was in residence at The Iridium in New York City. Pat Martino was scheduled to sit in a couple nights later. Two nights before the gig, Martino emails Carmen about thirty tunes and says something to the effect of “Learn these songs, because I may call them out at any moment.” Intorre, Jr. works his behind off to learn the tunes and is on point at the sound check a couple nights later. Martino looked back at the drummer and gave the subtle nod of approval. He was in, and he’s been in ever since.

It cannot be overstated how extraordinary it is to have musicians of this caliber and reputation as a festival’s opening act. Do not miss them.

Akiko Tsuruga Quartet: Thursday evening October 10th, 7:30-9pm, Josie Kelly’s Public House

Tony Monaco, whose trio will play Josie Kelly’s on the Friday night (9:30pm) of festival weekend, came up under fellow Columbus, OH native Don Patterson, who became part of the Philly-area scene when he moved to the area to play with Sonny Stitt and the venerable one, Pat Martino, in the early 60s. Monaco sometimes flies under the radar, but he’s had a serious career in his own right, recording his debut album with Joey DeFrancesco and touring and playing, as his mentor Patterson had, with Pat Martino.

Notably joining will be guitarist and Northfield-native, Howard Paul, who began playing gigs in Atlantic City as an adolescent. In addition to performing all over the country—both as part of the Tony Monaco Trio and other ensembles—Paul is the President and CEO of Benedetto Guitars, the custom jazz guitar manufacturer based in Savannah, Georgia that will also be sponsoring the festival’s Sunday Jazz Brunch at Gregory’s (more on that below).

Rounding out the Tony Monaco Trio will be drummer Joe Strasser. Most heavily influenced by drummers like Jimmy Cobb and Philly Joe Jones, Strasser has been a staple of the New York City scene for years now, with extended residencies from one end of the isle of Manhattan to the other. Down in the West Village, Strasser has seemingly played with everyone to come through Smalls, pianist Spike Wilner’s famous club, over the past decade or so, including (but certainly not limited to) a few names you might recognize from the foregoing—Akiko Tsuruga, Joe Magnarelli, Joe Locke, and Behn Gillece. And uptown, Strasser had a long run at Smoke, the equally well-known Upper West Side institution, with The Hotpants, the funk band he co-led with saxophonist Ian Hendrickson-Smith.

Tony Monaco Organ Trio: Friday evening October 11th, 9:30-11pm, Josie Kelly’s Public House
The final ensemble act of the weekend belongs to the **The Budesa Brothers**. With brother Rich on organ and brother Robert on guitar and lead vocals, the Budesas' bring a soulful, bluesy sensibility designed to make you dance, along with another more elusive quality, chemistry. Which can come when you combine forty years playing together and shared DNA. Folks down the shore know them from residencies at Tomatoes and The Crab Trap, and when Chicken Bone Beach comes calling, the Budesas will be among the first to take their cohesive groove seaside.

But strictly local yokels they are not.

They’ve had the Philly scene on lock for years, playing and recording with everyone from John Swana and Bootie Barnes, to Grover Washington, Jr. and Christian McBride, to Joey’s dad and Kevin’s brother—that’s Papa John DeFrancesco and Duane Eubanks, respectively. When Jimmy Smith passed away in 2005, Rich Buda was at the memorial service at The Clef Club—to pay his respects, of course, but also because he was asked to play! Can you imagine? That’s like being tasked with keeping the lights on at Thomas Edison’s funeral.

Some of the best ambassadors of organ jazz, not only locally but also nationally, the Budesas were among the musicians featured on an episode of NPR’s Jazz Night in America titled “Home Cooking: The Philadelphia Jazz Organ Tradition In Concert.” As a musician, it helps to play great and also to have friends in high places—the host of Jazz Night in America is, of course, Christian McBride.

You might also have heard the Brothers, along with drummer Lucky Thompson, on the nationally broadcast public radio program American Routes, where host Nick Spitzer let the national audience in on the secret Philly’s known for years: “Yes, these guys can bring it!”

And bring it they will, to this year’s festival, where the Budesas will be joined by the South Jersey Jazz Society’s own Tom Angello on drums. With energy expected to be sky-high after Joey DeFrancesco’s performance, the Budesas will know exactly which buttons to push to keep the party going. The bartenders at Gregory’s are pretty good at that, too.

**The Budesa Brothers: Saturday evening October 12th, 9:30-11pm, Gregory’s**

And then the coup de grace, the piece de resistance, the **Jazz Brunch**.

The Jazz Brunch will be proudly sponsored by Benedetto Guitars and will feature, what else? Guitars!

Philadelphia-native **Jimmy Bruno**, if not THE master, is a master of jazz guitar. Since getting his start with Buddy Rich at 19, he’s played with a panoply of greats spanning both coasts. No stranger to our headliner, Jimmy signed a multi-album record deal with Concord Records in the early 90s, which included the album he recorded with Joey DeFrancesco, 1996’s Like That. To commemorate their 75th anniversary, *DownBeat* magazine named Bruno one of the 75 best guitar players ever. At a tribute concert for an ailing Barney Kessel, in the early 2000s, Bruno was among thirty guitarists asked to play, but he didn’t merely play—he opened the event, with Howard Alden. All that, and he’s got a new album forthcoming, featuring his mentor, Philly guitarist Sonny Troy, produced by—wait for it—Joey’s brother, guitarist Johnny DeFrancesco!
Comprising the other half of this dynamic guitar duo will be the aforementioned Howard Paul, who will of course be present in his capacity as a musician and also as the chief executive of the guitar company sponsoring the event. The man wears many hats.

**Jimmy Bruno & Howard Paul: Sunday Morning October 13th, 11am-1pm, at Gregory’s**

And if you’re not jazzed out by then (which, is there even such a thing?), Philly native, South Jersey resident, saxophonist extraordinaire, and clinical psychologist, Michael Pedicin, will be teaching a master class on the history of the jazz organ at the Ocean City Free Public Library. Dr. Pedicin will discuss the jazz organ’s most influential players and will, most assuredly, highlight the strong connection between Philadelphia, Atlantic City, and the development of organ jazz. Demonstrations will be plentiful, so come prepared to groove.

**Michael Pedicin Organ Jazz Masterclass, Sunday October 13th, 2pm, at the Ocean City Free Public Library**

Jimmy Smith was a prideful, sometimes stubborn-sounding man, whose concept of self-worth didn’t seem to fluctuate with his—or his music’s—popularity. In 1990, when synthesizers were still very much in vogue, he told a reporter for UPI, “I don’t want to play something Mickey Mouse; if it isn’t the B-3, I’m not interested.”

Conventional wisdom dictates that it’ll take compromise, not intransigence, to bring some semblance of the music and culture that once was Kentucky Ave. back to today’s Atlantic City. Surely, there are forces beyond the control of regular people that make replicating what once was nearly impossible.

And yet, those days are not dead; the history is not quite history—because the will and immense talent of today’s musicians won’t allow it.

So come to this great organ festival to hear the boogaloos and the shuffles—they’ll be in no short supply. But stay to hear where folks like Joey DeFrancesco and Akiko and Pat Bianchi are taking this music next.

It might just prove instructive for how to creatively adapt our historic city for the future, while preserving the best of our historic past.

*Matt Silver  is a writer and jazz host at WRTI 90.1 in Philadelphia, whose own saxophone playing can most aptly be described as somewhere between not altogether hopeless and delightfully adequate. He lives in Ventnor.*
A Drummer’s Perspective

As a Drummer who has worked with some of the greatest Organists in the world, I never discerned the difference of jazz drumming with the organ instead of the more popular piano, bass format. I honestly believe that you play with an organist the same as you would with piano and bass. The only difference will be the sound quality and timbre. The organ is not as percussive as the acoustic bass. However, the piano doesn't have as many harmonic tones and qualities as a Hammond B3. The fact is, one is not better than the other. The drummer and the organist must both possess a great time feel, trust each other, and most important of all, always groove. - Byron "Wookie" Landham

Hear from more drummers about their approach to playing with organ trios in the next issue of Quarter Notes.

Corporate Partners

Since its inception in 2004 the South Jersey Jazz Society has relied on a number of corporate partners to provide funding for both our performance based as well as our educational focused events. Their support has helped us expand the number of jazz activities we offer throughout the year, and has allowed us to keep admission prices down.

OceanFirst Bank Foundation (formerly Cape Bank) has been the title sponsor for our annual four (4) day festival, and as of 2017 they have sponsored our annual Summer Concert Series. Shore Medical Center (formerly Shore Memorial Hospital) has also provided funding to assist us in presenting a full year round calendar of jazz concerts. Other area businesses have also played a central role in our success. Walt's Original Primo Pizza, Just 4 Wheels, Ocean City Free Public Library, the Rettino Group, and Godfrey Funeral Home have all partnered with the South Jersey Jazz Society for the past ten years at least.

It is vitally important for us to continue to expand the number of our corporate friends and sponsors. The “Arts” are extremely important in any community, and we are fortunate enough to have local businesses who recognizes and value the contribution that the “Arts” makes locally.

It is not an overstatement to say that without their support we would not be in the position we are in today. I am so proud that the South Jersey Society has successfully created a vibrant jazz scene here at the Jersey Shore.