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Holiday Jazz: The Music that Keeps on Giving

By Matt Silver

Since the beginning of collective consciousness, of looking outside of ourselves for meaning, our traditions, rituals and celebrations have taken on amplified meaning when accompanied by music. Whether instrumental, choral, symphonic, cantorial, rock, jazz or some amalgamation, music taps into that same part of our brain as religion or spirituality—the part that yearns for transcendence from the tangible.

As the holidays approach, it is worth considering why the most memorable recordings from some of jazz's most prolific recording artists have been those recorded specifically for this time of year. The cynical critic may call these recordings hokey or maudlin or even emotionally manipulative (the critic, as well as the holiday-time disc jockey, can be a scornful beast, especially, if we're talking about the latter, when the mic is off).

To be sure, Christmas music is a cash cow—this is why record companies are drawn to it and foist a Christmas album upon all their artists drawing air and maintaining a pulse. It cannot be denied: there are a lot of bad Christmas albums out there. Really, truly, unequivocally bad. But, there are a lot of great ones, too. A lot of albums that make the listener say, "Boy, I'd always enjoyed that artist, but I had no idea they could make music capable of making me feel like *that*."

Brubeck, Duke, Ella, Satch—Ella *and* Satch! California is plenty nice, but who'd want to be anywhere but in front of a frosty window with a hot beverage when listening to Ella and Louis get together on Irving Berlin's "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm"?

Folks you don't associate with Christmas music, at least not primarily: Dexter Gordon, Joe Pass, Sarah Vaughan, Nancy Wilson...all made respectable if not indispensable contributions to the holiday jazz canon.



[Register for John Colliani: Jazz on an Early Afternoon](#)



[Order Your Tickets for The Ed Vezinho/Jim Ward Big Band's "A Charlie Brown Christmas"](#)

Contributors this issue:

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Chet Baker clearly loved making the Christmas album, or at least it seemed like he did—I'm pretty sure any album where they let Chet sing ended up being among his favorites.

And don't forget about more contemporary artists. As difficult as it may be to adopt "new classics" when it comes to Christmastime, the tradition has lived on past 1965. A few years back, vocalists Nataly Dawn and Cyrille Aimée recorded a take of Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas is You" in French that is light and warm and fun and deserving of a spot in your annual rotation. Cecile McLorin Salvant, along with Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra (JALCO),

recorded *Big Band Holidays* in 2013. Recorded live at Lincoln Center, they miraculously communicate all the magic of New York City at Christmastime over the course of a single album. Dan Nimmer, who plays piano on that album, is simply ridiculous. The whole album is a powerhouse—of course it is, it's JALCO.

Where does one even stop? Though the classics are immutable, most from what every jazz-loving generation still considers the "golden age" of jazz, there are more musicians than ever with ideas and technique to match that are breathing new life into old ghosts of Christmases past. Sean Jones' "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" is so good it makes you want to violate all social norms, leave the Christmas lights up months beyond the first dirty looks from neighbors and play Jones' rollicking arrangement all year long. But even that might not top the new new thing, wunderkind pianist Joey Alexander's *A Joey Alexander Christmas*. If you need

proof that sometimes something we can't explain deigns to reach down and bestow an otherworldly gift upon a mere mortal, check out this kid's playing. This has to be the gift for the doubting Thomas in your life.

And then, of course, there are the jazz musicians we automatically associate with Christmas music, perhaps to the detriment of their musical legacy, because Christmas music they made was almost too good.

Vince Guaraldi is the ultimate embodiment of this. His name, indeed his entire career, has become indistinguishable from "A Charlie Brown Christmas," the holiday-time behemoth that swallowed Guaraldi's legacy whole.

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Guaraldi was right there with Cal Tjader, in San Francisco in the 1950s, at the forefront of the bossa nova explosion. Whenever I'm feeling down, I put on Guaraldi's "Ginza Samba," the immortal tune he wrote for Cal Tjader and Stan Getz's eponymously titled sextet album in 1958. It works quicker than seeing a shrink and is a good deal

cheaper. Guaraldi was firmly entrenched in those Tjader-led groups of the 50s, working with percussionists like Mongo Santamaria and Willie Bobo and later guitarist Bola Sete to marry the jazz born in America with Afro-Cuban musical sensibilities and traditions. And, of course, there was "Cast Your Fate to the Wind," which ended up becoming Guaraldi's biggest non-Charlie Brown-related commercial hit, a tune that was originally designated a B-side by the record company but caught on like wildfire when radio DJs realized they'd never heard anything quite like it.

In other words, Guaraldi was an animal, a compositional juggernaut, and a visionary. So, sometimes, it's a little sad to think that 99% of people know him as the guy who wrote the theme to *Peanuts*. But, if not for *Peanuts*, if not for *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, scores of people might never have been introduced to Guaraldi in the first place, and that would have been the far greater tragedy. And what's more: Guaraldi's compositions for *A Charlie Brown Christmas* are justifiably celebrated and deservedly iconic. There is a genius behind the ability to compose jazz that resonates with a mass audience, to create music from whole cloth that sounds and feels undeniably American. If there weren't that whole part of the Constitution dedicated to separating church and state, I'd be fine with Guaraldi's *Christmas Time Is Here* becoming the national anthem, or at least A national anthem. There are plenty of artists living at the avant-garde who will never make music that evokes the depth of feeling of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

And lest we forget, Guaraldi's Charlie Brown compositions were gateway drugs for many who ultimately became hooked on jazz. As a kid, I got to Brubeck through Guaraldi—the progression seemed natural, even though I didn't at that time know that Guaraldi had been into things that were arguably as innovative or even more so.

In that sense, for me, and I'd venture to say for many others, holiday-time jazz really has been the gift that has kept on giving.

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 Philadelphia & Ventnor.



*John Colliani
Jazz on a Early
December Afternoon*

GREGORY'S RESTAURANT AND BAR
DECEMBER 8TH 1:30-3:00 P.M

Three different sponsors have join forces in presenting Jazz Pianist John Colliani on December 8th at [Gregory's Restaurant and Bar](#) from 1:30 until 3:00 p.m. Great Bay Gallery, the South Jersey Jazz Society and the Somers Point Unique Experiences Club will be offering this event free to the public.

[Registration](#) and a \$10 beverage or foods purchase is all that will be required of those in attendance.

A Long History of Great Music In Somers Point

By Nick Regine

The South Jersey Society is but one example of the long history of great music emanating from the many haunts in Somers Point both past and present.

The first inkling of a vibrant music scene in Somers Point was epitomized by the Gateway Casino. It became the summer showcase for many big bands and popular singing groups of the 50's including Gene Kruppa, Stan Kenton, Cab Calloway, the Mills Brother, the Ink Spots and Louie Jordan just to name a few. In fact it was Arnold who gave Rosemary Clooney her first big time job. The side band during this time was Mike Pedicin, Sr. and his Four Men of Rhythm. Located on the very most south end of Bay Ave., this spot drew all the many Big Band and jazz groups that would play in Atlantic City and then pick up a couple of gigs along the Bay in Somers Point.

Arnold Orsatti was an elegantly dressed gentleman who got his start as a beer distributor in Philadelphia where he would eventually own Orsatti's Pump Room on 13th and Locust. He also owned several restaurants in and around Atlantic City. In the mid 40's Orsatti set his sights on Somers Point.

Originally Mr. Orsatti wanted to buy the Riverview Inn* that was located where The Crab Trap is now, but negotiations hit a stumbling block. He then decided to take over the old Gateway Casino. So in 1946 Orsatti leased the Gateway Casino from the then owner Bob Collins. In order to serve alcohol, Orsatti acquired a liquor license from a bar located on New Road where Chi Chi's was later located. Later, in 1951 Mr. Orsatti gave up his casino, moved the liquor license back to the New Road location from which it originally came and opened a small bar that for a while was called the Point Tavern.

After leasing the Gateway, Orsatti renamed it Orsatti's Casino.

A little known and now mostly forgotten night spot during this time period was Vaughn Comforts, located next to the Somers Mansion, Vaughn Comforts use to feature singing waiter festooned in long ankle length white aprons and black ties. A local rumor has it that this is where Tony Bennett got his start as a singing waiter. The Four Keys played there regularly and it was also home to a number of small jazz combos.

Fast forward to the early 60's and 70's and the Bay Avenue strip exploded with some of the best Rock and Roll bands anywhere including Conway Twitty, Mitch Ryder and the Detriot Wheels, Bill Haley, plus many more, and of course "The Band". Bob Dylan when he decided to go electric caught "The Band", formerly known as Levon and the Hawks, playing at Tony Mart's and the rest as they say is history. The cult movie "Eddie and the Cruisers" was filmed in Somers Point and feature many scene shot at this, the hottest of the hot spots in Somers Point.



The tradition of great music continued with the emergence of a summer beach concert series that has blossomed into a spectacular showcase for some of the best blues, Cajun, rock bands and more. Each Friday night in the summers the Bill Morrow Memorial Beach on Bay Avenue host hundreds of eager listeners who revel in the music performed to the backdrop of the Great Egg Harbor Bay.

Couple this with a number of festivals and places to go for good music that take place annually and you will see why Somers Point continues to be the place to go.

The South Jersey Jazz Society is proud to be part of this history and add to the lore and mystique of this small bay side community with a passion for music.

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www.SouthJerseyJazz.org | 609.927.6677

South Jersey **Jazz** Society

CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS CONCERT

Featuring
Ed Vezinho & the Jim Ward Big Band
with Cathy Rocco on vocals

CHRISTMAS JAZZ
AT THE POINT
MONDAY, DEC 16
6:30 – 9:00 p.m.
GREATER BAY COUNTRY CLUB
MAYS LANDING ROAD | SOMERS POINT
BUFFET 6:30 - 7:30 | SHOW STARTS AT 7:30 PM

\$40 members • \$45 non-members*
*includes Holiday Buffet

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This program is made possible in part through the New Jersey State Council of the Arts/Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts through the South Jersey Partnership with the County of Atlantic County Office of Culture & Heritage Affairs.

[Order your tickets today!](#)

Jazz with Philly Roots

By Michael Pedicin

As most of our readers know, I coordinate and produce approximately fifteen Sunday educational and musical events at the Ocean City free Public Library. I must admit, that after doing this for the past seven years, I work very hard at creating something new and informative each time I do it.

So, this past fall, while thinking about what I should put together for our 2019 winter series, I had a very exciting thought. I would put together a series that would represent jazz and the wonderful Philly players that have helped contribute to this art form of ours over the past few years.

Growing up in Philly myself, I have always maintained a very strong connection to the city. I played there as a young boy, as a teenager, and then decided to remain in Philadelphia until the age of thirty-five, at which time I made a move to the Jersey shore.

The first level of my own jazz education was that I studied with the saxophonist, Buddy Savitt, and later studied jazz, as most Philadelphians did, with the incredible jazz educator and guitarist, Dennis Sandole. We all studied with Dennis at one time or another. In fact, even the great John Coltrane took a few lessons at Dennis' notorious teaching studio.

I later continued my studies at the University of the Arts, and graduated as a dual composition and education major, as they did not accept the saxophone as a major at that time.

After graduating from UArts, I chose to remain in Philly instead of accepting a place as a grad student at the Juilliard School of Music. Some regrets here at missing that opportunity!



Throughout the next 12 years, I was fortunate to be one of the busy Philly studio musicians playing and recording with everyone from Stevie Wonder to the O'Jays, as well as a short stint with David Bowie and then hitting the "road" with Maynard Ferguson.

My attachment and love for Philly musicians was cemented when I became a young sideman with people like Trudy Pitts and Mr. C, and realized that these folks had something very special to offer. They had what I like to call, some extra "grit," that was not always found in the playing of musicians elsewhere.

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Philadelphia has been the “jazz college” for so many great musicians over the years, and continues to remain as such. Just to mention a few... saxophonist John Coltrane, saxophonist Michael Brecker, trumpeter Clifford Brown, trumpeter Randy Brecker, organist Joey DeFrancesco, drummer Philly Joe Jones, organist Shirley Scott, guitarist Pat Martino, pianist McCoy Tyner, bassist Christian McBride, bassist Stanley Clarke and the list goes on and on.

To this day, I feel that the “grit” in young Philly still exists, and thus I began to coordinate who I would like to bring in for the 5-part series beginning on November 10th and ending on December 15th to highlight Philly Jazz to the South Jersey Jazz Society and our OC Library fans.

I reached out to players, most of whom were friends, colleagues and fellow educators of mine, and the series kind of fell into place beautifully.

Although all of the musicians who have appeared at these Sunday afternoon events are worthy of mention and

accolades, I will focus here on the leaders of the groups for this article.

I invited saxophonist Chris Farr, saxophonist Victor North, bassist Mike Boone, pianist Sumi Tonooka, myself, and trombonist Don Collins to select their groups in a way that would best represent the superb talent of the young and aspiring musicians contributing to the jazz scene in Philly.

They did just what I had hoped! We were treated to 2:00 p.m. concerts and discussions on some chilly Sunday afternoons by some of Philly’s finest!

In closing, it is so very interesting to note that this incredible art form, jazz, which began on the shores of New Orleans in the early 1900’s, continued to migrate to places like Chicago, Detroit, New York, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia has now found its way around the world, including South Jersey.

Upcoming Events

JAZZ ON AND EARLY DECEMBER AFTERNOON

John Colianni, December 8 - Gregory’s

TOM ANGELLO ALL STAR BAND

Featuring Paula Johns and Dean Schneider & Andy Lalis - December 11 - Gregory’s

TOM ANGELLO ALL STAR BAND

Featuring Andy Lalis, Bob Ferguson, Johnny D’ Angelo, & John Guida - December 18 - Gregory’s

CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS

Ed Vezinho/Jim Ward Big Band featuring Cathy Rocco
December 16 –Greate Bay CC

THE YOUNG LIONS

Interview and performance by some of the young jazz artist in this area - STARTS IN JANUARY SPECIFIC DATES TBA

SWING INTO SPRING

Eddie Bruce with the Ed Vezinho/Jim Ward Big Band - March 23 – Harbor Pines CC

Member Spotlight

Nancy and John Thornton

Our earliest memory of attending a jazz performance in Somers Point was hosted by Tim Lekan at Sandi Pointe. But we're not sure exactly what year it was—probably early 2000's. We were not yet aware of the SJJS, so it may have been before it had been formed? But we continued to enjoy the weekly musical offerings and seeing many of the other avid jazz fans whose faces have become so familiar to us. When we did hear about the Somers Point Jazz Society, we didn't hesitate to join.

We had moved to Ocean City from Philadelphia in 2001, never imagining we would encounter such a lively jazz scene so close by! We are very fortunate to have been introduced to so many talented and personable people who, through their music, create a warm welcoming relationship with their audiences. These performances offer inspiration and encouragement to those who aspire to improve their own abilities to play jazz.

When we learned that the Somers Point Jazz Society had become the South Jersey Jazz Society, it was clear to us

"... We had moved to Ocean City from Philadelphia in 2001, never imagining we would encounter such a lively jazz scene so close by!"



that the membership was growing. And we also learned that SJJS had begun offering educational opportunities to introduce or enhance people's knowledge of this unique style of music. Programs providing knowledge of jazz music to school-age children are especially important so that its legacy can be passed on to the next generation. Another sign of SJJS expansion has been the annual four-day Jazz Festival which brings together both nationally-known jazz musicians as well as some of our local favorites.

Listening to live jazz music is always an uplifting experience for both of us, and it has given us many memorable moments—performances by Houston Person, Monty Alexander, the late Mulgrew Miller, George Mesterhazy, Paul Jost, Behn Gillece, Ken Fowser, and of course Larry McKenna!

These are just some of the reasons why we have supported and will continue to support the South Jersey Jazz Society.