

LITCHFIELD JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY JIM MOTAVALLI

PHOTO BY STEPHAN PAPANDREA



Champion Fulton @Litchfield Jazz Festival

Although the phrase “jazz festival” conjures open-air stages, it can also mean a nice air-conditioned auditorium with cushy seats at the private Frederick Gunn School in rural Connecticut. And so it was for the 2023 Litchfield Jazz Festival (Jul. 28-30), which until 2019 was held at the Goshen Fairgrounds. The festival (which dates to 1996) unfolded over three days, opening with a Friday evening performance featuring the Litchfield Jazz Camp Combo and the **Brandon Goldberg Trio** with guest saxophonist Don Braden, and closing with a Sunday brunch featuring the **David DeJesus Latin Jazz Sextet** in the school’s courtyard. In between, though, Saturday proved to be the main event: four performances back-to-back, starting at noon and ending just in time for dinner—and a torrential downpour. Before, after and in between performances, visitors got to browse an art room featuring photographs (many taken at Litchfield festivals past) by Steven Sussman, as well as surreal art from Danielle Mailer and posters by Steve Soklin, whose work celebrates jazz giants of the past.

Opening Saturday’s music was the **Ehud Asherie Trio** with Dezron Douglas (bass) and Jason Brown (drums). Pianist Asherie repeatedly noted how lucky he was to have secured the services of these two in-demand aces, and the ensuing set proved his point. On the set-opener (Sonny Clark’s “Cool Struttin’”), the Westchester-born Brown started dropping Art Blakey-style press rolls and Connecticut’s own Douglas (who attended the festival’s jazz camp as a young man) quoted “You Are My Sunshine” in a glistening solo, which demonstrated why he is a first-call New York bassist. Asherie, who never over-plays, is a pianist of great dexterity and diversity. His program included everything from an original dedicated for his son to Hoagy Carmichael’s “Heart and Soul”, Irving Berlin’s “What’ll I Do?”, a Dorival Caymmi samba, plus a rendition of Tony Bennett’s first hit from 1951, the Hammerstein/Wilkinson “Because of You”.

Vibraphonist **Steve Nelson** may be best remembered for his time with saxophonist David “Fathead” Newman (to whom he dedicated a blues) and the Dave Holland Quintet, but he’s also made five solo albums and appears as a sideman on almost 200 records with the likes of Kenny Barron, Johnny Griffin and Jackie McLean, among others. As a player, he is somewhere between Milt Jackson and Gary Burton, although with three and sometimes four mallets he is even more percussive than the latter. The Steve Nelson

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JAZZFEST WHITE PLAINS

BY THOMAS STAUDTER

PHOTO BY LOU VACCARO



Endea Owens @JazzFest White Plains

A brutal heatwave and stultifying humidity greeted the musical artists and attendees at the 12th annual JazzFest White Plains (twenty miles due north of Manhattan by car or a 40-minute Metro-North train ride from Grand Central). This year’s edition featured fifteen different acts spread across five days (Sep. 6-10), with heavy rain plaguing a good part of the finale. No matter: the entire event was a success, thanks to the enthusiasm and resiliency of all involved. The lineup for this seemingly modest undertaking gets grander and more adventurous each year, as the organizers clearly understand that booking intriguing, well-known headliners will sell out the ticketed shows. Thereby, a genuine buzz is created by showing appreciation for younger and local jazz artists, and by featuring performers who stretch the boundaries of America’s great musical idiom. The two big headlining acts were a quartet co-led by tenor saxophone titan Joe Lovano and guitar master John Scofield (a resident of nearby Katonah)—which performed two sold-out sets—and a duo between vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant and pianist Sullivan Fortner, who played two SRO sets the next day. These shows were held at ArtsWestchester’s headquarters on Mamaroneck Avenue in the heart of White Plains, a cozy venue (formerly a bank) that seats just 140 people.

Most of the shows were free admission, and though spread out across the city’s downtown, were easy enough to walk from one to the other. On opening day, drummer **Aaron Seeber**, a graduate of Purchase College’s Conservatory of Music, led his quartet through two sweat-drenched sets outdoors at the busy Farmer’s Market on Court Street. Joined by fellow Purchase grads Bruce Harris (trumpet) and Walter Stinson (bass), plus Charlie Sigler (guitar), the band mixed standards including “In a Sentimental Mood” and “Woody’n You” with selections from the leader’s brilliant debut album, *First Move*. Meanwhile, just down the street at ArtsWestchester, pianist **Helen Sung** played an hour-plus solo set to a rapt overflow crowd. She focused on repertoire by women in jazz, but also included a powerful, bravura reading of Chick Corea’s “Armando’s Rhumba” and a wild “Carolina Shout” by stride immortal James P. Johnson as an encore. Her rhapsodic ballad “Everybody’s Waltz” found her harmonizing deeply over improvised lines lifted from the song’s melody, her playing intensifying and then drifting back into a more pensive mood. Another original, “Elegy in the City”, introduced Geri Allen’s

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JAZZ EM AGOSTO

BY STUART BROOMER

PHOTO BY VERA MARMELO



Eve Risser @Jazz em Agosto

Jazz em Agosto always feels like a special occasion. Presented by Lisbon’s Gulbenkian Foundation, this year’s edition (Jul. 26-Aug. 6) took place in mid-town grounds graced by ponds, extensive gardens, a major museum and a contemporary art gallery, with nightly concerts held in an open-air amphitheater amid grasslands and trees made that much more spectacular with colored lighting. Since the festival’s inception in 1984 (save for a brief spell in the ’90s), programming has been the responsibility of Rui Neves, an authoritative advocate with ears attuned to the cutting edge of jazz and improvised music. In the early years of the festival, he brought foundational radicals like Sun Ra, Jimmy Giuffrè, George Russell and Ornette Coleman and that spirit remains at the heart of jazz in Portugal, where free jazz dovetailed with the country’s democratic revolution. It was particularly evident this year in the gender balance of performers and similarly with veteran innovators and emerging artists alike, from Evan Parker and Myra Melford to Marta Warelis and Camille Émille.

The festival’s opening band, **Eve Risser’s Red Desert Orchestra**, possessed both scale and vision. The pianist’s 12-member ensemble fused musicians and music from Mali and France and percolated dense rhythms with its engaging collection of soloists, including the leader, Ophélia Hié and Mélissa Hié (percussion) and Sakina Abdou and Grégoire Tirtiaux (saxophones). Compound visions emerged with vibrant energy, expanding on the group’s recent album *Eurythmia* (Clean Feed).

Evan Parker (playing only soprano) appeared in two distinct groups and his continued influence as a creative inspiration for younger musicians was evident. The first was a sextet version of Trance Map +, his project with turntablist/electronic musician Matt Wright who explores and alters Parker’s recorded archive. The group created a rapidly evolving, pointillist tapestry in six movements, each beginning with a different soloist who contributed material that welcomed collective expansion: trumpeter Peter Evans brought pyrotechnical bravura; cellist Hannah Marshall richly expressive melodic depth; percussionist Toma Gouband earth-rooted percussion with clicking stones and rapid drumming with branches shedding their leaves. Electronicist Pat Thomas managed the magical trick of not only leaving space for his fellow musicians, but creating new spaces.

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Quartet (Rick Germanson-piano, Kiyoshi Kitagawa-bass, Charles Goold-drums) played George and Ira Gershwin's "Embraceable You", a fine opener for the group, Milt Jackson's "Bags' Groove" and a driving rendition of Juan Tizol's "Caravan".

Champion Fulton's trio was a festival highlight. Equally adept and fiercely experimental as a singer and pianist, she plays aggressively with tempo and a wide vocal range (*sans* scat singing). Fulton shifts dynamics rapidly without ever losing touch with a song's melody: a Fulton trademark is a jump to the top of her range at the end of a line. Her all-standards program featured ace support from Hide Tanaka (bass) and Fukushi Tainaka (drums), a formidable rhythm section that's been with Fulton for two decades. When not singing or playing during her set, Fulton offered historical tidbits about songs from the Great American Songbook such as the Silver/Lewis/Sherman "Every Now and Then", recorded by Helen Humes half a dozen times. "Too Marvelous for Words" got an especially delicate treatment. And any thought that Fulton couldn't make it as just a pianist were dispelled by a spirited take on Phineas Newborn Jr.'s "Theme for Basie". Arguably best heard live, that's indeed the format for Fulton on her latest release, *Meet Me at Birdland* (s/r).

The skies were darkening as the **Peter Bernstein** Quartet took the stage. Since 1990, the Rutgers/New School-trained guitarist has worked and recorded steadily with just about everyone. If you've bought a contemporary jazz album recently, he may well be on it. He's also made more than 20 solo albums, including *Monk* (Xanadu), a masterly transition of the pianist's music to guitar. Adam Birnbaum (piano) and Doug Weiss (bass) made the 2014 trio album *Three of a Mind* with veteran drummer Al Foster, and the three of them formed the backing band for the guitarist's Litchfield set. Bernstein plays somewhat hunched over his guitar, but the lack of visual clarity doesn't matter when the notes are so clearly articulated. The Jim Hall-influenced guitarist has a ringing tone and an accessibility that transcends genre. Playing mostly originals ("Dragonfly", "Harbor No Illusions", "Simple as That"), the group also dipped briefly into the Monk songbook before closing with an infectious, though lesser-known, Sonny Rollins calypso, "Newark News".

The festival may eventually move back outdoors, considering the spectacular countryside around Litchfield. The jazz camp (dating to 1997 and held just before the festival proper) deserves special mention. Saxophonist **Don Braden** is the music director, with a faculty that includes Paul Bollenback (guitar), Claire Daly (baritone), Peter McEachern (trombone), Dave Ballou (trumpet), Nicole Zuraitis (voice), Ugonna Okegwo (bass) and Matt Wilson (drums).

For more info visit litchfieldjazzfest.com

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"Feed the Fire", which Sung filled with dizzying runs and staccato riffs, one precipice after another. A magisterial pianist, she saved her most elegant playing for a medley of Marian McPartland's "Melancholy Mood" and "Kaleidoscope", which concluded with exciting bop runs and a big crescendo.

Later that same day, the much-loved jazz stroll (where attendees can walk from one venue to another to hear music) began with guitarist Doug Munro and his Django-flavored band **Le Pompe Attack**, continued with vocalist **Joe Boykin** from nearby Greenburgh, a soulful, Lou Rawls-like entertainer fronting a top-notch band that mixed veteran trumpeter Duke Jones with promising young drummer Parker Reid, then finished with **Lynette Washington**, a talented singer, with Amina Figarova (electric piano). The latter two performances were held indoors and became noticeably

crowded; listeners unfortunately strained to focus on the music, which competed with cocktail-hour chatter and dinner-time food service.

Miraculously, a dinner "under the stars" the following evening—complemented by two sets led by famed drummer **Louis Hayes** and his quartet—was not interrupted by the rain squalls that swept through the region that evening. Joined by the same band from his latest album, *Exactly Right* (Savant)—David Hazeltine (piano), Dezron Douglas (bass) and Abraham Burton (tenor)—Hayes, now 86, brought precision cymbal work and driving energy to the hard bop proceedings. Burton's strong, supple solos made one wish he would appear more frequently on bandstands in and around Gotham. Colombian jazz harpist **Edmar Castañeda** kicked off Friday with a free solo concert inside the White Plains Public Library. Initially scheduled as an outdoor event, the oppressive heat and threat of rain necessitated Plan B, but the appreciative audience was mesmerized by the insistent syncopations and engaging display of virtuosity. Castañeda plays his entire instrument, creating sounds on the frame and running his hands down the strings for a whooshing effect. His "For Jaco" was a brilliant showstopper.

The **John Scofield-Joe Lovano** Quartet, with Ben Street (bass) and Bill Stewart (drums), found the co-leaders exulting in their long history together: they first met in 1971 as students at Boston's Berklee College of Music, collaborated on Scofield's *Time on My Hands* (1989), Lovano's *Landmarks* (1990) and later guided the short-lived supergroup Scolohof (2002). At ArtsWestchester, their unison lines, joyous interplay and probing, fiery, ecstatic solos were further proof of tight musical empathy and friendship. The following evening, **Cécile McLorin Salvant** dazzled the audience with a vocal mastery that shows why she is already regarded among the greats. Her storytelling genius, matched by theatrical flair and superb song selection, highlighted her own artistic versatility, as well as the breadth and reach of the improviser's art. Her pianist Sullivan Fortner, too, traversed the long arc of jazz with his magnificent pianism. The vocalist seemed more at ease during the second set, which included stunning renditions of Stephen Sondheim's "Being Alive" and Selena's "Dreaming of You".

Heavy rain finally impacted the festival on the last day during the White Plains Jazz & Food Festival, dampening sets by vibraphonist **Mike Freeman** and a wholly entertaining band co-led by bassist **Richie Goods** and vibraphonist **Chien Chien Lu**. But the skies cleared in time for a raucous and uplifting performance by bassist **Endea Owens** (known for her past work with Jon Batiste and The Late Show Band), who performed with her own band The Cookout. Assisted by winning vocalists Shenel Johns and J. Hoard, Owens played songs from her newly released debut album, *Feel Good Music*, but the overflow crowd went wild with her take on Nina Simone's slow, slinky blues "Four Women", Johns bringing a surfeit of emotion to the fore. Owens' last song, "For the People", had everyone up out of their seats and line dancing in front of the stage, with New York Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins right in the middle of all the fun.

For more info visit artswestchester.org

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Parker also revisited *Descension, Out of Our Constrictions* (Eremite) with composer and guimbri master **Joshua Abrams'** Natural Information Society. Lisa Alvarado layered the music with modal drones on harmonium and Mikel Patrick Avery maintained shifting compound rhythms. Bass clarinetist Jason Stein wove complex interactive lines with Parker, who demonstrated the endurance and creativity that have marked his work for nearly 60 years. The hypnotic weave developed across some 90 minutes. The Attic—a

trio of **Rodrigo Amado** (tenor), Gonçalo Almeida (bass) and Onno Govaert (drums)—created taut, high-energy, three-way free jazz in which invention and immediate communication were always present. Another trio, Ghosted, amplified the amphitheatre's hypnotic summer ambiance, with Johan Berthling's bass ostinatos and Andreas Werliin's dense drum work compounding animated backdrops to **Oren Ambarchi's** glittering electronic fields of processed guitar.

Pianist **Myra Melford's** Fire & Water Quintet consists of gifted musical partners, and their set was filled with light. Whether leading or in contrapuntal dialogue, saxophonist Ingrid Laubrock's lines were ever-shifting events with sudden mutations in timbre, attack and direction, every shift the act of a mercurial imagination. Melford's own solos were dances across the keyboard, while Mary Halvorson (guitar), Tomeka Reid (cello) and Lesley Mok (drums), outstanding improvisers all, contributed to the luminous effervescence. **Mary Halvorson's** Amaryllis was similarly impressive the following night, playing mostly music from a forthcoming record. The leader is acutely conscious of sound, from the lush classic jazz guitar timbre she favors to electronic pitch shifting that provides maximum contrast. Her band Amaryllis, the composer's signature instrument, follows suit. Without reeds or keyboards, it's as sonically distinct as classic groups such as the MJQ, the Gerry Mulligan Quartet or the recent bands of Henry Threadgill and Bill Frisell. It's propelled by Nick Dunston (bass) and Tomas Fujiwara (drums); Halvorson and Patricia Brennan (vibraphone) create a brilliant skein of burbling trebles, and the often-contrapuntal melodies are enacted by Adam O'Farrill (trumpet) and Jacob Garchik (trombone). Balancing this compositional emphasis with one or two soloists on each number, Halvorson allows her bandmates to shape the works with their own visions.

Norwegian guitarist **Hedvig Mollestad's** Ekhidna represented the looser, more creative end of fusion. Two percussionists provided rhythmic detail and orchestral breadth to support the improvisatory skills of the leader and Marte Ebersson (keyboards). Susana Santos Silva added substantially here, her thoughtful trumpet solos adding reflective depth to the music's signal drive.

The final band of the festival was also the largest. Composer/drummer **Gard Nilssen's** 17-member Supersonic Orchestra, a thunderous group of Northern Europeans, restricted itself to just five different instruments: seven saxophones, three drum kits, three basses, two trumpets and two trombones, at times suggesting three ensembles stacked together. Sheer numbers and volume conjoined with enthusiasm and a gifted ensemble, including Per "Texas" Johansson and Mette Rasmussen (saxophones), Thomas Johansson (trumpet), Petter Eldh and Ingebrigt Håker Flaten (bass). The band concluded with Louis Moholo-Moholo and Mongezi Feza's anthemic "You Ain't Gonna Know Me...", bringing the festival full circle to the merger of African and European cultures with which it had begun with Risser's Red Desert Orchestra.

Along with eleven main-stage performances, there were additionally four intriguing solo concerts in an indoor auditorium. Silva combined her strong presence as a trumpeter, alternately lyrical and forceful, with a video of images from nature. Guitarist **Julia Reidy** matched resonating harmonics with extensive interactive electronics. I'm still seeking ways to describe the solo performances of pianist **Marta Warelis** and percussionist **Camille Émille**, each possessing a mercurial musical vision: the former swept across the keyboard and interior of her instrument in singular gestures of shifting focus, transforming time and space; the latter created simultaneous layers of rhythm and timbre with sometimes self-made instruments.

For more info visit gulbenkian.pt/jazzemagosto