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JazzTimes®

04/25/06

Cape May Jazz Festival 2006 - Spring

By [George Kanzler](#)

The Cape May Jazz Festival just had its 25th successful run on April 21-23. No, not its 25th anniversary: this festival, true to its contrarian nature, takes place twice a year, so the 25th festival marks 12 and a half years, not 25. The Cape May Jazz Festival is indeed contrarian and unlike any other jazz festival you've ever attended.



Alan Nahigian

Mike Stern

Cape May, a spit of land where you can watch the sun rise over the Atlantic the same day you watch it set over the seaward end of the Delaware Bay, is a summer beach resort relying on its once fabled past as a Victorian-era Newport-lite. It boasts charmingly restored bed and breakfast guesthouses and grand old hotels, plus worth-the-trip (in Michelin Guide-speak) fine dining in small gourmet restaurants. But that's in the summertime.

Jazz bookends the resort season in Cape May, with the April jazz festival heralding the coming season—but not enough for the parking meters, many of the touristy businesses, or a lot of those charming bed and breakfasts to be operative yet. Ditto for the November edition of the festival, which is often accompanied by a Nor'easter. Usually April weather is pleasantly spring-like, but this time it was more like November—windy, rainy and

chilly.

All that just makes the jazz festival more appealing. Not only is it the only game in town; its venues are shelter from the storm, places to share a common bond with your fellow jazz devotees. And except for the ice rink/high school gym ambience of Convention Hall, all the venues at the festival were fairly to cozily intimate, places where audience and musicians were literally face-to-face — party-band bars, hotel dining rooms, commandeered discos and a blues club.

This festival was a tribute to Little Jimmy Scott, and the singer headlined two shows Friday night at Convention Hall to open the festival. The shows were as much tributes as concerts, with videoed talking heads — Harry Belafonte, Dianne Reeves, Nancy Wilson and others — paying their respects between numbers by Scott and his excellent band. Scott's voice doesn't have the falsetto-like aching purity of his prime years, but like Sinatra in his waning years, he retains the ability to phrase and shape a song in his unique, glacially slow, supremely dramatic behind-the-beat style.

And the audience loved it. That's one of the pleasures of Cape May: the audience is the opposite of the jaded big city and big festival audiences. This is an audience that doesn't hear that much live jazz, an audience from the hinterlands of the mid-Atlantic coast, with maybe some from Philadelphia or D.C. It's an audience that bursts into applause for bass solos, and cheers for hit high notes or long notes in the middle of solos.

It's also a festival where you get to hear the surprising and/or unexpected. That Friday night those serendipitous pleasures included Jennifer Vincent's virtuosic solos on baby bass (Ron Carter sometimes solos on one) with Willie Martinez and La Familia Sextet, a cooking Afro-Latin band; drummer Ralph Peterson recruiting a replacement from the audience (a hip young drummer) and proceeding to bop it up on trumpet on Charlie Parker's "Confirmation" with guitarist Gregg Skaff's Trio including organist George Colligan; drummer Kim Thompson contributing a slinky original to guitarist Mike Stern's driving quartet set; and pianist Robert Glasper adding indelible solos to a memorable set by singer Carmen Lundy.

A popular feature of the Cape May Jazz Festival is the afternoon jam sessions on Saturday and Sunday. The duplex club Carney's hosts two of them and Cabanas, the blues club, hosts a blues jam. The jazz jams provide an alternate view of mainstream jazz, as many of the musicians from New Jersey, Philadelphia, Wilmington, Delaware and the Baltimore-D.C. area are rarely heard in New York. The jams also gave pianist Aaron Graves and, especially, saxophonist T.K. Blue, both of Jimmy Scott's band, a chance to shine. Others who impressed with their swing and passion were tenor saxophonists Lenny Roberts and Bootsie Barnes, trumpeters Eddie Morgan and Winston Byrd, and trombonist-singer Clifford Adams.

Later Saturday afternoon, a wine-tasting and CD-signing party brought together musicians, singers and fans at the Boiler Room, the sometimes disco in the newly renovated Congress Hall hotel.

Saturday night's featured concerts (two by each) found Billy Paul, a pale shadow of his "Me and Mrs. Jones" prime, at Convention Hall and Hugh Masekela and his rousing band of South African Afro-Pop musicians at the high school theater. Masakela turned his concert into a celebration of African freedom and community, a genuinely uplifting experience.

Pianist Eric Lewis chased the title of the "hip-hop Oscar Peterson" with his florid, impressive piano chops and inclusion of a fourth "trio" member on "special effects and electronic percussion." If only he had half the conceptual improvising strength of the previous night's Robert Glasper.

Nancy Kelly, a singer more cabaret than jazz, was a fey disappointment in the hotel dining room where Carmen Lundy had triumphed the night before, but Sharon Clark, a singer based in the Baltimore/D.C. area, proved a revelation in the less than commodious confines of Carney's Other Room. If you think you hear shades of Billie Holiday when Madeleine Peyroux sings, how about the spirit of Sarah Vaughan? Clark not only conjures up

memories of the Divine Sarah; she does them justice. I never thought I'd hear a singer with the range, musicality and command of tone and timbre that was Sarah at her best, but now I have. The only thing Clark needs to establish her own voice is a repertoire apart from Sarah's – and an industry not obsessed with female singers as glossy magazine cover images.

The weather, wet and wild most of Friday and Saturday, turned pleasant Sunday as the festival wound down with a gospel brunch and more afternoon jam sessions. The weekend culminated in a traditional gospel-jazz parade around the two Carney's, in the style of a New Orleans wake.

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