

## **Jazz at the Center 2008**

### *A Weekend Celebration of Jazz in Camden, SC*

It may be small, but this historic, hospitable town is home to big ideas. “Tonight, you could probably say Camden, South Carolina, is the center of the jazz universe,” quipped Howard Paul as he introduced the opening night concert of Jazz at the Center. Paul, president of Benedetto Guitars, served as master of ceremonies for the performance in the Wood Auditorium, Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County. The weekend celebration of jazz was held May 16-17, 2008.

Packing eight performances, one of which included a workshop, into the two days, the festival, featured a variety of styles from traditional jazz to jazz fusion. It drew a diverse audience of music lovers from out of town and out of state, as well as hometown folks. Many made a weekend of it, visiting Camden’s antique shops and galleries and eating in its restaurants, most located in renovated vintage buildings.

Back by popular demand, jazz legend Bucky Pizzarelli headlined the fourth annual Jazz at the Center concert in the Wood Auditorium. At 80-plus, he has been a fixture on the jazz scene since the early 1950s and is known as a master of the seven-string guitar. He has performed with Frank Sinatra at the White House, toured with Doc Severinsen and recorded with Sarah Vaughan, to name a few.

“Bucky Pizzarelli is still on his game -- and his stage presence is magical. He brought out the best in all who shared the stage with him,” said Daniel Riddick, producer and founder of the festival.

Sharing the stage with him was the Jazz Guitar Summit, a group of five outstanding guitarists and tight rhythm section. Vocalist Mary Ann Hurst added her mellow stylings to such tunes as “I Thought About You.” The various musical combinations proved to be real crowd-pleasers, evidenced by enthusiastic applause and cheers.

The JGS began the first set on a darkened stage, dramatized by red lighting, while playing a Jim Mings arrangement of “Bernie’s Tune.” Everyone took a solo and had as good a time as the audience.

The remarkable Pizzarelli started off with a guitar solo and then led the band into a Richard Maxwell arrangement of “Nuages.” “This arrangement is all about Bucky, and he really shines on this tune,” said Maxwell.

Opening the second set was “Blues Medley,” arranged for five guitars and voice by Kevin Jones and Mary Ann Hurst. Seven string guitars were employed for the bass lines, and the guitars acted as both a tight performing horn section and an old-fashioned blues guitar jam section.

The able master of ceremonies, Howard Paul, whose wit and knowledge of jazz moved the evening along at a great pace, showed his versatility by joining Pizzarelli and the band for a William Leavitt arrangement of Jerome Kern’s “All the Things You Are.”

Meticulously orchestrated by producer Riddick, the weekend kicked off before the concert with a catered cocktail hour, featuring a theatrical display of jazz memorabilia and Benedetto and Comins guitars. During the weekend, numerous musicians performed at five different indoor venues, most within walking distance of one another, as well as outdoor events on the center’s campus.

From the traditional jazz of the JGS, the festival continued to a late night jazz show at The Venue on Broad, featuring the Yonrico Scott Band. Also known as the backup band

for jamrock guitarist Derek Trucks, Scott and his group are really seasoned in jazz, said Riddick. Drummer Scott is a jazz veteran, who has performed with artists such as George Benson, Freddie Hubbard and Sonny Stitt. A highlight of the Scott band was an inspired version of Billy Cobham's fusion classic "Red Baron." Additionally, vocalist Mary Ann Hurst provided a spontaneous moment when she sat in for a late night version of "Summertime."

"Adventures in Jazz/Basic Chord Construction" was a Saturday morning performance workshop with guitarist Richard Maxwell and bassist Reggie Sullivan. The festival workshops are gaining in attendance and designed for education – and enjoyment.

More enjoyment was in store at the Saturday jazz lunch at the Carolina Café, highlighted with a walk through the great American song book, featuring vocalist Mary Ann Hurst and the Richard Maxwell Trio. "Isn't this wonderful? I feel like I'm in New Orleans," said one broadly smiling patron.

Later that afternoon, back at the Daniels Building Courtyard on the center's campus, was a free show by the Camden Middle School Jazz Band. It was great to see young people interested in jazz.

Immediately afterwards, was a performance by a band that has been keeping jazz alive for years. Celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, the Carolina Jazz Society took over the center's Backyard Stage, providing a great walk through the early days of jazz. The free concert featured Dick Goodwin on trumpet. Who could forget the group's joyous version of "Sweet Georgia Brown?"

And what better way to wind down the weekend than with dinner shows at two of Camden's finest restaurants? At one restaurant, diners could enjoy Jazz A'La Carte, a stellar duo composed of Mary Clare Gatch (vocals and sax) and Richard Maxwell (guitar) and at another, the fabulous guitar duo of Jerry Sims and Dwight Spencer.

"After four years, Jazz at the Center seems to be firmly established," said dedicated festival producer Riddick, whose top priority is musical integrity. He cares about both the musicians and the audience and strives to pair the right musicians to the right venues. He's already tuning up for the fifth annual festival. Jazz at the Center is on the Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County's calendar, so mark yours for May 15-16 in Camden, SC.

*Reviewed by Sheila McKinney with input from festival producer Daniel Riddick and guitarist Richard Maxwell.*