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Jazz at the Center 2007

A weekend celebration of jazz in Camden, S.C.

From the stellar technique of jazz legend Bucky Pizzarelli to the polished performance of the Jazz Guitar Summit to a morning workshop on the business of the music business, Jazz at the Center offered a weekend for both the serious aficionado and the occasional listener.

With a growing audience, the third annual weekend celebration of jazz, a Fine Arts Center of Kershaw County event, was *the* event May 18 and 19 in Camden, S.C., the oldest inland city in the state. For two days, the small Southern town known for history, horses and hospitality added another *H* to its list of attributes: It got hip. Hip enough to draw jazz fans from beyond Camden's borders. Jazz could be heard at five different venues, all within walking distance of one another in downtown Camden.

Meticulously orchestrated by festival producer Daniel Riddick, the weekend began Friday night in the arts center's Bassett Library with an impressive exhibit of guitars, mingling D'Aquistos, Comins and the newest prototype Bendettos from the factory in Savannah, Ga. President and CEO of Benedetto Howard Paul spent time answering questions about the instruments. Guitar enthusiasts of all types wandered around the display like kids in a candy store.

Afterward, the main event found an appreciative audience at the center's Wood Auditorium.

Pizzarelli's mellow tones are amazing. A fixture on the jazz scene since the 1950s, Pizzarelli has performed with Frank Sinatra at the White House, toured with Benny Goodman and recorded with Rosemary Clooney and Henry Mancini, to name a few. In addition to the headliner's solos, he jammed with various members of the Jazz Guitar Summit (JGS).

The show opened with two acoustic guitar tunes, featuring vocalist Mary Ann Hurst, who was a highlight as she joined the instrumentalists with her effortless delivery and sophisticated stylings. Jim Mings played a Taylor, and Richard Maxwell played a Comins Renaissance. The acoustic sound was great and blended well with Hurst's voice. Mings had an interesting riff on "Soon It's Gonna Rain" that sounded like a wind chime in the garden.

The JGS cut loose next with a rousing version of "The Loose Appaloosa," appropriate for Camden and its horse industry. (The city is a thoroughbred training center and home to two annual steeplechase races: the Carolina Cup in the spring and the Colonial Cup in the fall.)

Pizzarelli joined the JGS for a brilliant version of "Nuages." At 80 plus, he is still as vibrant as ever. His warm, relaxed and professional stage presence had the near capacity audience enthralled.

One of the many highlights was a duo performance of "Honeysuckle Rose" with Pizzarelli and Jerry Sims. They were having a good time playing the tune at a slow, relaxed pace before launching into a few choruses at breakneck speed. The audience was as much a part of this performance as the musicians: applauding as a melody was initially slated, laughing at the interplay of the two when they were clowning around, and erupting in thunderous applause at the conclusion.

Another highlight was a blues medley arranged by Kevin Jones for five guitars with inspired vocals from Hurst.

For the finale, Pizzarelli and the JGS were joined by Howard Paul for a smoking version of "Four Brothers."

With solid academic and performance credentials of their own, the JGS musicians are guitarists

Jerry Sims, Richard Maxwell, Jim Mings, James Hall and Dwight Spencer with Kevin Jones, bass and sax, and Scott Burkholder, drums.

The Friday late night show at The Venue on Broad featured The Joe Taylor Group with special guest, New York woodwind virtuoso John Ragusa. The show was propelled by the tasteful and fiery fretwork of New York guitarist/composer/producer Joe Taylor. One of the most interesting moments was Ragusa playing the conch shell. What a unique sound! Collectively, the group produced a really tight mix of smooth jazz and good old rock 'n' roll, even including a jazzy take on "Riders on the Storm."

Saturday morning, Taylor was on tap again for the workshop, "Paid by the Note," during which, he chatted about his more than 20-year career in the New York television, theater and recording industries. He has recorded with such diverse artists as Dave Koz, James Galway and Tom Waits. His numerous soundtrack credits include "Stephen King's Golden Years," "Spytek" with Roger Moore, and "National Geographic Explorer."

Joining Taylor in the conversation and an impromptu acoustic performance was New York composer and pianist Jeff Franzel, who has worked with the likes of Mel Torme and Frank Sinatra. Adding to the enlightening discussion was Steven M. Gates of New York, where he heads his own management and production company.

In addition to her Friday night performance, Hurst was also a hit singing the next day with the Richard Maxwell Trio. People lingered over their lunches as the ensemble performed tunes from the great American songbook at the Southern Contessa.

The Venue on Broad opened up Saturday afternoon to host another side of The Joe Taylor Group. This was The Joe Taylor Trio, featuring Taylor on acoustic Comins guitar, Franzel on keyboards and Ragusa on flutes and sax. The music seemed to flow effortlessly with each musician sharing solos while constantly maintaining the melody. This show was a joy to watch.

Saturday evening began with dinner shows at two fine downtown restaurants. Jazz A'La Carte performed standards at The Crescent Grille, and Borgstedt and Mings entertained at the Old Armory Steakhouse.

After dinner, The Venue on Broad was the spot to be again for the festival's grand finale, starring saxophonist Skipp Pearson and his jazz ensemble. Pearson and band were joined at times by vocalist Mary Louise, who seemed to be channeling Sarah Vaughan. An unannounced highlight was saxman Bryson Borgstedt sitting in and jamming with Pearson. What a way to end the weekend!

From the first chord to the last note of Jazz at the Center, "musical integrity is No. 1," said festival producer Riddick. He is an organizer concerned with both the musicians and the audience and one who strives to pair the right performers to the right sites. And he's already thinking about spring 2008, when the fourth annual festival is scheduled for May 16-17 in Camden.

(By freelance writer Sheila McKinney with input from festival producer Daniel Riddick and guitarist Richard Maxwell.)