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Jazz Takes Center Stage

The Small Town with a Big Sound

Small Town Can Make a Big Sound with Jazz Society

From a festival once a year to various events throughout the year, Somers Point Jazz Society plays on.

by Nick Regine
Community contributor

“The little engine that could,” this is the way George Mesterhazy, nationally known jazz pianist and accompanist, described the Somers Point Jazz Society.

In a small town, with a population of less than 12,000 people, eight miles south of Atlantic City and 50 plus miles southeast of Philadelphia, a small but dedicated group of individual has given rise to what might be the most vibrant jazz scene south of Manhattan.

Starting in 2004 the Somers Point Jazz Society began making a musical difference in this small corner of our state. Over the next nine years they continued to grow and prosper.

“In many ways what we’ve created is somewhat unique given the demographics and size of the town,” said society president Nick Regine.

“Not to blow our own horn,” he said with a laugh. “But I think what we’ve created is something remarkable. There was no jazz scene up here 51 weeks out of the year now there is a vibrant jazz scene.”

The genesis of this organization can be traced to the Somers

Point Foundation for Education. This group, which raised money for local public schools, created a number of different fund raising events, including a golf tournament, dinner dance, acapella concert, and a small jazz festival.

Regine, who used to work on a number of those events, said when he was planning to retire in 2004, he was afraid that it would be the last year for the jazz festival.

Regine said in order to keep the festival alive, the foundation decided to partner with the newly formed Somers Point Jazz Society and turned over the planning and management duties.

Slowly but surely they began to grow this event from a single day event to a four-day event encompassing 11 venues. In 2014 the event will expand to include performances in both Somers Point and Ocean City’s Music Pier.

Artists that have performed in the past at the festival have included: Pat Martino, John Colianni, The Caribbean Jazz Project, Earl May, Jimmy Cobb, Mulgrew Miller, Michael Pedicin, Richie Cole, Vincent Herring and many more.

This year, the headliner, Arturro O’Farril’s Big Latin Jazz Band, will be at Ocean City’s Music Pier.

“We needed space,” said Regine. “Especially when we bring in a band that has 17 or 18 pieces, we need a venue that can accommodate a group like that.”

Regine noted that expanding to Ocean City will also open their festival to a new group of visitors.

The expansion of the annual jazz festival was but a small example of the impact this organization has had on the local jazz scene.

“They just took off,” Regine said of the society that now hosts year-round events with over 300 members.

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A group of young musicians warm up before their set at last year’s jazz festival.
Photo courtesy of the Somers Point Jazz Society



The Michael Pedicin Quartet plays at the Right Notes, an event that raised funds for the MS society.
Photo courtesy of the Somers Point Jazz Society



Jaleel Shaw on the alto sax performs at Gregor's Restaurant and Bar.
Photo courtesy of the Somers Point Jazz Society



For more information about the Somers Point Jazz Society please visit them at www.spjazz.org or call them at 609-927-6677.

Photo courtesy of the Somers Point Jazz Society

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The Board of Directors consist of 20 individuals both musicians and non-musicians alike. The head of the artistic committee is Joe Donofrio, who is a Grammy winning music promoter. Michael Pedicin is the head of the education committee. Pedicin is a tenor saxophone player and he is currently the head of the jazz studies program at the Richard Stockton State College of New Jersey.

Starting in 2005 the Somers Point Jazz Society offered a winter and summer jazz series, concerts, member artist album

release events and numerous educational initiatives. The educational pieces have featured classes, workshops, and seminars for both students and adults.

One highlight of the educational aspect of what the society offers is a day long student workshop where high school student musicians from various local schools spend the entire day working with jazz educators.

The Somers Point Jazz Society offers over 30 different jazz events annually. In addition to the events that are produced by the Somers Point Jazz Society itself, the Society also underwrites other local jazz performance which include monthly performances of the Ed Vezinho/Jim Ward Big Band, weekly jazz concerts and individual artist initiatives.

Recently the Somers Point Jazz Society produced compilation CD featuring jazz society member artists. Member artist featured on the album include Joe Barrett, Bob Ferguson, Edgardo Cintron, Gina Roche, Cathy Rocco, Paul Jost, Joe Mancini and many more.

Regine noted that the members and artists have a similar desire to continue to grow the jazz scene in town.

"Of course there have been challenges because of the recession and grant money drying up," said Regine. "But financially the society is actually in good shape. It hasn't always been easy, but with the support of our membership and our partnership with other organizations, we've managed to keep going."

The Somers Point Jazz Society is very proud of its on-going partnership with Richard Stockton State College of New Jersey,

Jazz Scholarship

2014

The society initiated a scholarship program for high school students in Atlantic and Cape May counties.



Kate Davis at last year's jazz festival.
Photo courtesy of the Somers Point Jazz Society

the Ocean City Free Public Library, and other local educational based organizations.

"I'm Somers Point born and bred," said Regine. "And from the beginning I wanted to help create something that could be a part of the community and actually give back."

Regine said the membership said it is vitally important to be part of the fabric of the community and they has helped sponsor several community events including the Good Old Days Festival and the Somers Point Summer Concert Series. They are members of both the Somers Point Business Association and Ocean City Chamber of Commerce.

He said Somers Point Jazz Society is honored to be a supporter of the local music and arts program in the Somers Point Public Schools and has donated nearly \$30,000.

During the society's involvement in the local schools, Regine said that the membership has noticed a younger demographic getting interested in jazz.

"That's the future of jazz," he said of the young musicians that are getting involved in the society.

"We are fortunate that we do have a lot of local up and comers and young musicians in the area and that we can give them a platform to demonstrate their skills and talent," he added.

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Festival Lineup

Community partnerships have helped the Somers Point Jazz Society put on an annual jazz festival.

Annual Jazz Festival

This year's Cape Bank Jazz at the Point will run May 15-18. Headlining is the Arturo O'Farrell Latin Jazz Big Band on May 17 at the Music Pier in Ocean City. Other artists include: Russell Malone, Michael Pedicin, Eddie Henderson, Houston Person with guest with Cathy Rocco and John Colianni. This event runs from Thursday until Sunday with other performances in Somers Point at Sandi Pointe Coastal Bistro, located 908 Shore Road, Gregory's Restaurant, located at 900 Shore Road, Clancy's by the Bay, located at Maryland and Sunny avenues.

Community partners include: Cape Bank, Shore Medical Center, Passion Vines, Walt's Original Primo Pizza, WRTQ, Gregory's Restaurant, Sandi Point Restaurant, Greate Bay Country Club, Dennisville Fence, NJ State Council on the Arts, NJ Division of Travel & Tourism, South Jersey Industries, Somers Point Business Association, Heart and Soul Foundation, Mission Point Church, Ocean City Chamber of Commerce, Richard Stockton College, City of Somers Point, Atlantic City Convention & Visitors Authority, Just 4 Wheels, State Farm Insurance, Bay Harbor Realty, Ocean Free Public Library. **-Nick Regine**



Pat Martino of the Pat Martino Trio performs as the headliner at last year's festival.
Photo courtesy of the Somers Point Jazz Society