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Xylophonist Heather Thorn lead a hard-charging small group that spanned the generations from the Roaring '20s to the Swinging '60s at the Suncoast Jazz Festival in Clearwater Beach, Florida on November 17. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

Swingin' on the Suncoast

Florida's long-running Suncoast Jazz Festival spans five simultaneous indoor venues and ballrooms between the Sheraton Sand Key and Marriott Sand Key in Clearwater Beach, where 20 bands and guest artists from around the country entertained the trad jazz faithful for three days (and nights) last November. *Jersey Jazz's* photo editor Mitchell Seidel made the annual trek to the Sunshine State's west coast where he labored mightily over a sometimes balmy weekend for our exclusive report which begins on page 26.

LETTERS IN THE ATTIC: Ted Rosenthal's new jazz opera recalls the holocaust. See page 26.

JAZZ ON THE SUNNY SIDE

Story and photos by Mitchell Seidel

For nearly as long as there have been jazz festivals, producers have tried to come up with different ways of keeping them fresh, whether it means changing names, themes, artists or venues.

The events that have to cope with this more often are the ones that have been around the longest. For example, George Wein's Newport Jazz Festival has been through many incarnations over six decades while still maintaining its identity, as have many others.

Florida's Suncoast Jazz Festival in Clearwater Beach, (formerly the Suncoast Jazz Classic and prior to that the Suncoast Dixieland Jazz Classic) has been keeping pace with the present by keeping tabs on the past, or older styles of music, that is.

In its earliest incarnation, the festival was strictly Dixieland, catering to an increasing graying audience with ever aging performers. In the past few years attempt were made, with varying results, to attract a younger crowd. This past November's Suncoast festival may have finally reached that happy medium that satisfies both gray- and not-so-gray-beards while attracting a younger crowd.

Don't worry, there was plenty of traditional jazz, but post-bebop music was kept to a minimum. So how did they do it? By booking a selection of musicians who can span generations, have an appreciation of the Great American Songbook and realize that melody and swing did not end in 1960. The sources of these musicians are both local and national, sating audience members who patronize jazz "parties" while also giving a nod to central Florida's community of professional performers.

Two of the talented out-of-towners were extremely versatile reedmen: Australian-born Adrian Cunningham (by way of New York City) and Michigan's Dave Bennett. Their talents accorded them well during the four-day weekend, where they were pressed into service in various capacities, from big band era clarinet playing to 1960s rock and roll.

Cunningham came with his Professor Cunningham's Old School band in tow and led them through a variety of sets including Count Basie, traditional jazz and a selection of Bobby Darin's top charted hits. Bennett, as has been his wont, did a Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde with his quartet, shifting from mellow Benny Goodman-themed clarinet playing to energetic Jerry Lee Lewis piano pounding and rockabilly singing.

The Suncoast Jazz Festival is rare in festivals in that it caters more to its audience than it does to the taste of a single producer. That works both for and against it. On one hand, November's lineup was full of repeat performers who, over the years, have attracted a



The official start of the Suncoast Jazz Festival takes place poolside at the Sheraton Sand Key with a Dixieland jam and Florida's version of a New Orleans second line — dubbed a "Parasol Parade." The sunny skies were bright but the morning temperatures were a bit cool for some attendees on November 16.



Apparently having exhausted all the horns in his musical tool chest, Adrian Cunningham resorts to playing simply the mouthpiece of his clarinet.

coterie of loyal fans who vote with their wallets, either by directly sponsoring performers through the festival board or by buying tickets.

On the other hand, that means there's the danger of hearing the same repertoire in different order over and over again during the course of a weekend. Fortunately for the audience — and the performers' sanity — that was avoided.

Interestingly enough, the weather played a part in getting the indoor festival off to an unexpected and very enjoyable start. An annual pre-festival sponsors' dinner, customarily held as a warm-up the day before the event, had its musical lineup scattered to the four winds thanks to a cross-country snowstorm that stranded the scheduled trad group, The Queen City Jazz Band, in Denver. So it fell to local musician Nate Najjar, a Charlie Byrd- influenced guitarist to cobble together a band with the few musicians who were early arrivals. The result was one of the highlights of the festival, even if it was limited to a select invited audience.

With Najjar on guitar, Chuck Redd on drums, Tommy Cecil on bass, Rossano Sportiello on piano and festival newcomer James Suggs on trumpet, the group went through two entertaining sets of swing and bop, with a little trad thrown in, that might have set a Suncoast festival record for never featuring "Indiana." Reedman Cunningham, who was performing a separate concert concurrently in downtown St. Petersburg, was able to make it back to the hotel to join the band for the second set, and the husband and wife vocal and guitar duet of Paul and Theresa Scavarda made a brief appearance as well.

Another surprise of the festival was provided by xylophonist Heather Thorn of Orlando. Although known to locals through her leadership of the retro swing group Vivacity and her hosting of the "Nostalgia Radio Hour," Thorn led an ad hoc group of festival musicians — drummer Ed Metz, trumpeter Charlie Bertini, trombonist Pat Gulotta, tuba player Dan Howard, pianist Jeff Phillips and the ubiquitous Cunningham — performed a brilliant set that ranged from the Roaring '20s to the Swinging '60s. What can you say from a set that included a Benny Goodman-esque "Sing, Sing, Sing," with drummer Ed Metz channeling his best Gene Krupa, a breakneck "Tico Tico," a transcribed Red Norvo solo of "I Got Rhythm" and a nod to Ray Charles' version of "I Can't Stop Loving You." With the vintage instrumentation of the xylophone and her modern musical aesthetic, Thorn brings to mind some of the newer New Orleans brass bands in that she's unafraid to perform a broad range of music. She hopes to be making a guest appearance in New York this summer with Vince Giordano's Nighthawks.

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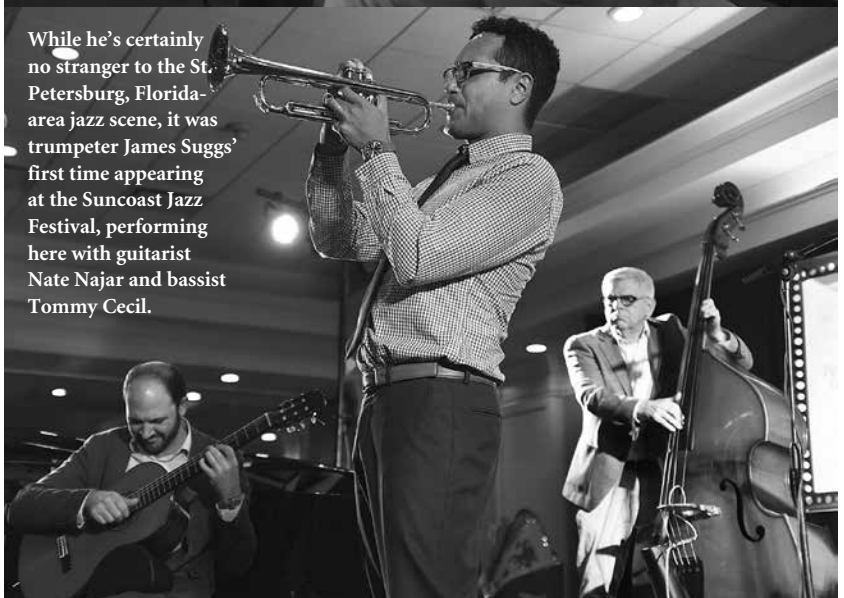
As always, Dave Bennett's over-the-top (and atop the piano) Jerry Lee Lewis impression set brought adoring fans on to the stage at the Suncoast Jazz Festival on Nov. 17. Bennett, whose repertoire includes both Benny Goodman clarinet swing and 1950s rockabilly vocals is a jazz party perennial.



The ever-cheery pianist Rossano Sportiello was among the jazz musicians pressed into service on short notice at the Suncoast Jazz Festival when some performers were waylaid by a snowstorm.



While he's certainly no stranger to the St. Petersburg, Florida-area jazz scene, it was trumpeter James Suggs' first time appearing at the Suncoast Jazz Festival, performing here with guitarist Nate Najjar and bassist Tommy Cecil.



SUNCOAST JAZZ FESTIVAL

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While the Suncoast Jazz Classic/Festival started out as a strictly Dixieland affair, over the years it has gradually changed direction to attract a broader crowd. Older fans may grumble that it's not what it was, but there are still plenty of traditional bands on the bill. The High Sierra Jazz Band from California and Cornet Chop Suey from St. Louis are both examples of bands that are flown in for the event, while New Jersey expatriate Betty Comora with her voice and washboard always seemed to be around the Sheraton and Marriott Sand Key hotels. In fact, a lot of the older professional musicians you run across from central Florida have earned their coin at the region's traditional-themed gigs, including Disneyworld. Another "imported" band that always seemed to be at the festival is violinist Tom Rigney's group, Flambeau. The California-based jazz party favorite has a lineup that can handle selections that range from cajun to blues to country boogie-woogie, almost always in the same set.

Another example of festival expansion is the inclusion of local swing dancers, who seem to make the festival part of their "go-to" calendar of events. And kudos again go to the participating bands who make the effortless transition from music for swing and sway to swing and sweat.

Suncoast's smooth transition to a slightly younger audience was greatly aided by Nate Najar, a brilliant acoustic guitarist whose musical taste and performing skill was evident in the polish around the edges of this year's festival. Before being pressed into service for last-minute band-drafting duties for the pre-fest sponsors' dinner, this year he was formally assigned the task of arranging the evening jam sessions at the Sheraton lobby bar, renamed "Condon's Corner" for the festival. The bar, by the way, was a day-long musicians' "hang," attracting festival attendees and just plain hotel visitors transitioning from the beach and pool because no entry ticket was required. In fact, very budget-conscious (i.e., cheap) jazz fans could very easily make a music-filled day of it at the bar for just the cost of a beer and a (very good) burger and never miss a pro or college football game on the widescreen TVs.

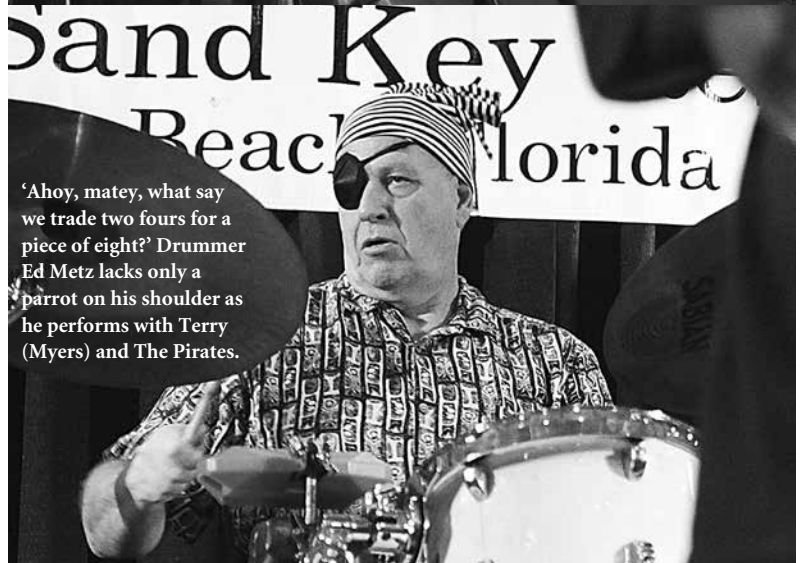
As a further effort to cultivate a younger audience, the festival brought in a couple of high-caliber local high school jazz bands early in the day Friday and then encouraged the students to hang around for some clinics with a few of the professionals. It was encouraging to see the senior citizen crowd listening attentively to big bands populated by high school seniors. The not-for-profit jazz classic no doubt hopes to see them back as ticket-buyers for the 29th version of the event, November 22-24, 2019. For more information go to suncoastjazzfestival.com. **J**



The California-based High Sierra Jazz Band presented their version of West Coast trad.



All rise as The Suncoast Jazz Festival closes out with a rendition of 'America the Beautiful' by pianist Jeff Phillips and trumpeter Charlie Bertini.



'Ahoy, matey, what say we trade two fours for a piece of eight?' Drummer Ed Metz lacks only a parrot on his shoulder as he performs with Terry (Myers) and The Pirates.

Photos by Mitchell Seidel