

"Jazz Happens:" The First Pittsfield City Jazz Festival

Ed Bride

As the county seat and self-professed "cultural downtown" of the Berkshires, Pittsfield, Mass., one would think, must have a thriving local music scene, including a jazz festival.

Up until mid-October, 2005, one would be wrong, at least about the jazz part.

Enter a small team of jazz fans-zealots might be a better word-and Pittsfield cultural director Megan Whilden. To this group, add a mix of supportive underwriters, a dynamite venue whose scruffy exterior is more than offset by luxurious acoustics and, oh yes, some great music, and you have the first, putatively annual, Legacy Banks Pittsfield CityJazz Festival.

The festival is the latest example of the City of Pittsfield's commitment to urban revival through cultural activities, including visual and performing arts. The festival described its program as "traditional and mainstream Jazz in a downtown setting."

Opening night of the three-day affair featured perennial favorites, the renowned New Black Eagles Jazz Band, who brought the house down with their mix of traditional Jazz. The Black Eagles had traveled to Albany that same morning, Oct. 14, for a live preview on the regional NPR station, WAMC, which helped promote the festival to large and enthusiastic audiences. Although they have appeared at Tanglewood and other venues in western Massachusetts, this was the Black Eagles' first performance in Pittsfield.

New England Jazz Ensemble, which was returning to Berkshire County after its successful regional debut last December, recorded its concert for a forthcoming CD. The Ensemble was performing all new compositions and arrangements, thanks to a grant from the prestigious Aaron Copland Fund for Music. The big band's open rehearsal on Saturday afternoon, Oct. 15, was also recorded, with free admission to students, providing a rare, up-close opportunity to see how such productions work.

Cabaret songstress Joyce Breach opened for them on Saturday evening.

The weekend concluded with a New Orleans fundraiser on Sunday evening, with local musicians in the spotlight. In fact, throughout the weekend about a dozen separate free performances were held at restaurants and other spots, giving the weekend a true festival air.

As late as Labor Day weekend, it was uncertain whether the festival would actually happen. Though sponsored by the City, the event was to be self-sustaining, with no risk to the municipal budget. As with most cultural events, a market like Pittsfield could not support a full-scale, professional event if it had to rely just on ticket sales, especially since the City wanted to keep ticket prices accessible to everyone.

The New England Jazz Ensemble gig was assured, thanks to the Copland grant, but underwriting for the rest of the weekend had not materialized. The Black Eagles were holding the date, but time was running out: it was already too late to promote an October event in any monthly periodicals or travel magazines, but the dailies, weeklies, and radio and the Internet were still available...if only funding could be assured.

Then, Legacy Banks, whose CEO J. Williar Dunlaevy is a Black Eagles devotee, stepped up to the plate with a major donation, and others followed, including Lenox innkeeper Frank Newton of The Gables, who subsidized the appearance of Joyce Breach.



Ed Bride, festival emcee and Megan Whilden, Director of Cultural Development for the City of Pittsfield (Photo: Richard Dunne, courtesy CulturalPittsfield)

When small groups strive to get things done, a few dedicated, tireless individuals can make magic happen. As instigator of the festival, the writer was fortunate to have such a group. The volunteer committee also included Tracy Wilson, director of the Berkshire Music School (another co-sponsor), and instructor and Jazz guitarist Andy Kelly, who spearheaded the local aspects and procured dates for several groups.

Add enthusiasm from the media, audiences who welcomed the event, and local restaurants who applauded the music and droves of fans, and the ingredients for success were complete. All this, in the face of miserable weather that plagued New England, bringing flooding to the region over much of the 10-day period that included the festival weekend. Mayor James Ruberto enthused that the Festival would help in the renaissance of the downtown, by bringing world-class musicians to perform to large and receptive audiences. He pledged that this would become an annual event.

The venerable Berkshire Music Hall was the site for the headliner performances. Once a vaudeville venue, the Hall had fallen into disrepair and disuse until local entrepreneur Ray Schilke purchased it, did some rehab, and then re-sold it to Barrington Stage Co. The regional theatre company has since closed the theater for a major renovation.

With renovations expected to be completed on the Hall by summer, and the restoration of Pittsfield's Colonial Theatre also anticipated by mid-summer, Pittsfield will once again be ready with world-class venues for the second annual Pittsfield CityJazz Festival, October 13-15, 2006.

— Ed Bride is a board member and recording secretary for the New England Jazz Alliance. After this year's event, he was named chairman of the Pittsfield CityJazz Festival.

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