

# JerseyJazz

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*promotion and preservation of jazz.*

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Montclair State University students Salvatore Alaimo, on alto saxophone, left and Carlos Juncal on trumpet formed the front line horns for the scholarship performance at the May 20 NJJS Jazz Social at Shanghai Jazz in Madison. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

## Jazz Goes to School



Serious jazz education in the United States traces its roots to North Texas State College (now the University of North Texas) in the early 1940s. The school's legendary jazz studies program got its start there when an NTSC graduate student was asked by the dean of the college's music school to write his master's thesis on a proposed curriculum for a dance band major. That curriculum got a big boost when Stan Kenton, who saw the program as a pipeline to supply crackerjack players for his band's challenging book, took an interest. (Kenton later donated his entire library of scores and papers to the school.) Jazz music's fortunes, dance band or otherwise, have waxed and waned over the years, but jazz education programs

have become well established at many universities around the country. Including here in New Jersey where New Jersey Jazz Society co-founder Jack Stine endowed a jazz studies scholarship in the name of clarinetist Pee Wee Russell at Rutgers University in the early 1970s. The Society has continued in that tradition for nearly 50 years and now awards annual scholarship grants at each of five New Jersey universities with degree programs in jazz studies. James Pansulla, NJJS director of education programs, presented several of the the current crop of scholarship students at Shanghai Jazz in Madison on May 20 and his report on the students and Mitchell Seidel's photos of the performance begin on page 28.

## Chameleons in the Top Ranks at JALC's Essentially Ellington

By Schaen Fox

I love Jazz at Lincoln Center's yearly Essentially Ellington competition and festival for high school jazz bands. Many may read "high school" in that last sentence and lose interest. I have been to many of the 23 events, and will attest that there is more musicianship from these kids than I have heard from professional musicians in some bars across the country and overseas. (Indeed one Hungarian professional played so poorly he drove me from a bar, but that's another story.) These are not average high school bands. They are a combination of exceptionally talented and dedicated students and band directors. To get to the three-day event in New York they, along with over 5,300 other bands, must compete in a vigorous yearlong program of mentoring, monitoring, competitions and judging. That willowing removes the chaff.

This year we couldn't experience it there, but Jazz at Lincoln Center posted it live via Livestream, so we watched the final concert and award ceremony at home. When the announcer said that the first to play of the three top prize winners would be the Newark Academy big band from Livingston New Jersey, I resolved to enjoy the show and contact Julius Tolentino, the band's director, and Erica von Kleist, one of the judges, to talk about the event later.

Julius wears many hats. He is a father, husband, gigging musician, music teacher, and band director at the prestigious Newark Academy. He is also a veteran of Essentially Ellington, having taken various bands there over the years. Last year his band, known as Chameleon, had just missed landing in the top three. He resolved to build on that. "I asked the kids to raise their hands according to how many years they have been in the jazz program. My lead alto, Charles Pan and lead trombone player Reid Christmann have been involved with all of our groups, and studying with me since sixth grade. We have 11 seniors and I was adding up all the years on the board saying, 'This is why it is going to be a special year, this group has experience.' Actually, most of the kids had already been to Essentially Ellington, some several times."

And a wealth of talent helps when a crisis hits. "We would have been in a lot of trouble if we didn't have as many sax players as we did. Two kids got really sick leading up to the festival and we weren't sure they were going to be there. We had a lot of people covering parts at the end. One of our alto players, Sam Pensiero was really sick with a virus, and he actually missed the first day. The



The Newark Academy Chameleons pose at the Jazz at Lincoln Center Essentially Ellington high school jazz band competition in April where they placed in the top three for the first time. Photo by Fred Goode.

other alto player, Alan Lin had a horrible staph infection and was out of school for two weeks. Luckily [he] was cleared by the doctor the week of the concert. Even then it was still touchy, but both of them ended up playing great."

There was also the problem of how best to prepare the novices. "I must admit I was a little nervous about some. Our lead trumpet player and soloist, Ben Chaddha is a freshman and new to Newark Academy. He did a fine job, but I think it was a shocker for him to play under that kind of pressure. Also one of our bassists, Giulia Socolof is in the group for the first time. She is a junior, but she also did an awesome job. Leading up, I knew they would feel that way, so I put a little more pressure on them and made sure they were in certain situations so they would feel more comfortable when they got there. They played in all the clinics, which helped settle them in, and they all had a lot of stage time before we got there."

Several years ago, the winning band dramatically turned their music stands away and played from memory. A member of the Jazz at Lincoln Orchestra joked to me that he wasn't sure he could do that. Newark Academy rose to the challenge. "We turned our music stands away last year for the first time, and did our program from memory. These kids are super bright, and they did it flawlessly. I don't know if I could do that. Only three bands out of the 15 read music on stage. It just shows how the level gets raised each year. If one band starts something, then all the bands follow suit. A couple of years ago an outstanding bass player didn't play with an amp. Now all the bands don't use an amp. So "No Amps, No Music" is the new trend.

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## NEWARK ACADEMY/ ESSENTIALY ELLINGTON

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The band gave an outstanding performance in the competition. Judge Erica von Kleist said, “The thing that struck me the most was their spirit and energy. The level of the bands has been getting so high, that it is hard to judge on specifics like intonation, section playing and did they execute this section of the music cleanly? All the bands are doing that. Now you have to look at bigger qualities, like ‘Is this band swinging? Do they sound like a band? What is their spirit like on stage?’ One of the things that stood out with Newark was they not only executed the music well, but they had an identifiable sound to their band. It is like you hear one of your favorite bands or artists, they have a sound and you just know it is then right off the bat. Newark has that depth of identity. That is amazing to see at such a young age.”

After days of competition it was time to announce the prize winners; a task Wynton Marsalis performs with style. “When Wynton announces the top three, he does it pretty nonchalantly. The kids aren’t expecting to hear it. We were the first to be named, and only a couple of kids stood up all excited, and then sat down. They didn’t want to celebrate in front of the other groups. I thought that was great. Then the second band was announced, and they got up cheering, and our kids realized it was okay to be excited.”

“I broke down crying, which I’m glad was not caught on video. It definitely was the highlight of my career, teaching or playing. I’ve been at Newark Academy for 11 years, and it has been a dream of mine for Chameleon to make the top three since the start. It was overwhelming, and I broke down maybe two or three times. There is so much emotion involved with this. There were students crying too. They had never seen me react like that. I’ve never felt like that.

I was a hot mess. It was unbelievable. I always talk about internal motivation and that I want them to do this for themselves and for the group, but when our guitarist Cosimo said, ‘You deserve this Mr. T,’ I felt

this group wanted this for me as much as they wanted it for themselves. That was really touching.”

What remained were the final performances by the winners and the award ceremony. Each school performed two selections. Newark Academy played a version of “Chinoiserie” that lasted roughly nine minutes, due in part, to guest soloist Elliot Mason. Julius explained, “I love Elliot’s playing, and I wanted to hear him do his thing on “Chinoiserie.” He just went nuts on it.” That grand romp was followed by a five minute long “I Ain’t Got Nothin’ but the Blues.” Then the other two winners performed in turn.

Next, Wynton announced the awards and again, Julius’s students took several individual prizes. Bassist Vikram Bala had begun “Chinoiserie” in grand style and Julius noted, “He’s been working on the playing of Oscar Pettiford and Paul Chambers already. He put his own thing on that introduction to ‘Chinoiserie.’ That is why he got that award.” Two more winners made notable solos in the Ellington classic. “Allen Zhu is a senior who came here as a freshman. In my first lesson with him he was quoting Charlie Parker without seeing the music. He has perfect pitch, and is probably one of the most advanced students I ever had come through Newark Academy.” Guitarist Cosimo Fabrizio’s solo was equally impressive, but was only part of his importance in the band. “He has been the leader of this group, and an irreplaceable kid. He is a senior that has left his mark.”

A good drummer is bedrock to every band’s success, and sophomore Teddy McGraw, powered Chameleon. Julius noted that, “He was the only drummer last year to get an outstanding award from [master drummer and judge] Jeff Hamilton. When he gave him this award Wynton wanted Teddy to go back to Jeff Hamilton and shake his hand because Wynton saw Jeff tear up when Teddy was playing. I think it was because Teddy took to heart everything Jeff told him last year. He focused on that brief interaction with Jeff, and changed a lot of things in his playing and his set-up. You can hear the difference from last year to this year, and that had a lot to do with Jeff Hamilton

and it got to him a little bit.

The nearly six-minute long “I Ain’t Got Nothin’ but the Blues” belonged to singer Samantha Powell. The proud band director related, “Samantha Powell was the star of that week. Everybody was trying to get her autograph or just talk to her. She got a standing ovation at the festival like I have never seen before. The whole place stood up for her even before the song was done. We got two standing ovations because of Sammy. Then when she got her solo award, she got another standing ovation. She is only a junior and a very special talent.”

After distributing the awards, Wynton waxed eloquently about his favorite part of the evening. “I love this. You never forget your band director. Ever! If you like them or don’t like them, you’ll always remember them. What they put into this, and what it takes out of them, and the effect it has on their family life, and the different roles they have to play, from councilor to first aid, therapist, politician, fundraiser, family member, the list goes on and on and on. You know that all the directors talk about their wives and families because it is a tremendous sacrifice for everyone around them, and for very little pay. These directors are unbelievably outstanding. They work year round. The respect I, and all of the judges, have for your band directors cannot be put into words.”

He asked the 15 directors to take the stage individually when called. Then he said to the students, “I want you to think about what these band directors have made possible, and how much love and energy and effort they have put into you, and I want you to express your appreciation to them. I want you to hold your applause to get a real good storm going when everybody gets up here. I want you to make people in New Jersey hear you.” And then Rose Hall erupted in an eight minute sustained standing ovation. As it was ending Wynton marveled, “That was a record. They deserve every second of that. That’s fantastic.”

Recalling it later, Julius added, “That was an amazing moment, especially the first four minutes. The next four were a little uncomfortable, since I had to go to the bathroom. I’m thinking, ‘Oh boy this is too

long.' My students knew, so they kept the applause going. They were messing with me. It started to die down after five minutes and I thought, "Okay I can go soon." Then they got up and started it again. It was a pretty classic moment, and another funny story that I won't forget."

The victory was also financially rewarding. "Second place receives a check for \$2,500.

We definitely can use some instruments for the band room, but I want to do something for the students, a victory sweater or something nice." When I asked about the students future plans Julius said, "Out of our 11 seniors, six are going to the Ivy League, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, Yale, Cornell and I can't remember all the amazing schools everyone is going to. It is amazing to see so many of our outstanding scholarly students playing in jazz band. This year none of them are talking about music as a career. I think a lot of them will play semi-professionally because they are already playing gigs now. Very few from Newark Academy go on to study just purely music. That is just the nature of where I teach."


"For me what matters is that they have a love and passion for music, and look back on these experiences knowing they achieved excellence as a group. This group also won first place at the Mid Atlantic Jazz Festival, were finalists at the Mingus Festival and won first place at the New Jersey Association of Jazz Educators State Festival for the ninth year in a row. The band is already focused on next year's repertoire. I hope our success can motivate and inspire other programs to deal with Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Charles Mingus and all the other prolific musicians our music has to offer."

Erica von Kleist is doing just that. She is a veteran of Essentially Ellington as a student musician, a professional musician and competition judge. She moved to the Flathead Valley in Montana

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some years ago, and shares Julius's dream. "My non-profit, Groovetrail is starting an Ellington project called "The Flathead Ellington Project." It is going to be an all-star high school jazz ensemble from students throughout the Flathead Valley learning the music of Duke Ellington. I have three local band directors on board with the project. I actually brought them with me to Essentially Ellington as my guests for professional development purposes. They were blown away. They had shown the livestream and You Tube clips to their students to inspire them, but it is not the same unless you go there and feel the energy in that room.

Not only are we preserving Ellington's legacy, but we will also be upping the level of student talent here in the jazz field. Students working hard on specific audition material are going into the ensemble. Their level is going to skyrocket because of all the rehearsals they are going to have, working with mentors and receiving private lessons. They are going to be representing their valley, and their peers are going to see them and think, "Wow, I want to do this too." So they are going to start practicing more and etc., etc. We are really excited about this project."

You can see much of the 2018 Essentially Ellington on You Tube. A good start is entitled "4/6 Ellington2018 Competition - Performance of Three Top-Racing Bands." 



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