

No one's 'Undecided:' Siuslaw Jam rocked with jazz

**Siuslaw Jam 2017
Review**
By **BURNEY GARELICK**

"First you say you do and then you don't, and then you say you will and then you won't. You're undecided now, so what are you gonna do?"

"Undecided," written by Sid Robin and Charlie Shavers, is a standard tune in the Great American Songbook. On July 8, at the Florence Events Center on the second evening of the first annual Siuslaw Jam Music Celebration, it aired its argument — and with the confluence of exuberant clarinet, sultry alto sax, percolating percussion, pulsating string bass and clairvoyant vocals, no one was undecided.

Florence is definitely on the cusp of becoming a jazz destination.

Impressed by the Siletz Bay Music Festival in Lincoln City, Florence's Joshua Greene worked with Siletz Bay Artistic Director Yaacov Bergman and organizing board members to direct and produce the Florence event.

Perhaps Oregon salmon tastes so good because it has spawned in rivers of jazz.

The Siuslaw Jam featured world-class jazz musicians: Ken Peplowski, clarinet and tenor sax; Aaron Johnson, alto sax and clarinet; Ehud Asherie, piano; Dave Captein, acoustic bass; and Clairdee, peerless vocalist.

While great jazz swings with wit, complementary comedy can add to the fun. That must have been the organizing thought for booking standup comedian Pete Barbutti, a longtime jazz aficionado who plays piano, trumpet and accordion.

We didn't hear him play any of those instruments, even though the big bellowing beast sat on stage waiting to be squeezed.

However, on Saturday evening, Barbutti did play the broom, a regular long-handled bushy

broom that Halloween witches fly. With a little help from the band, the comedian swept the scales of Duke Ellington's "Don't Get Around Much Anymore."

Of course, Barbutti has been around plenty. An octogenarian, he is a veteran of television a half century ago, including Arthur Godfrey's show, Garry Moore's tenure, Steve Allen's alley, and Johnny Carson's corner. Barbutti is an old-school comedian, rampant with silly puns on silly situations — the dog that walked into a bar, opposing World War I pilots commiserating over a dustup in the wild blue yonder, and Ellington being Canadian because of his song, "Take the Train, eh."

Barbutti was fun, although the Siuslaw Jam jazz did not need comic relief. We were already dizzy with joy on Saturday when the band swung out with "A Night in Tunisia." It was called "An Afternoon in Akron," Peplowski quipped of Dizzy Gillespie's tune.

Peplowski, an affable emcee with a penchant for cracking wise, is a supremely gifted clarinetist, particularly on the lovely romantic ballad, "The Single Petal on A Rose," written by Ellington as a piano solo after he was presented to Queen Elizabeth in 1958.

Jazz diva Clairdee dazzled with a sumptuous arrangement of Gershwin's "Someone to Watch over Me," a zany take on "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby" by Gus Kahn and Walter Donaldson, and a poignant and ironic "The End of a Beautiful Friendship" by Nat King Cole.

Other tunes by these sterling musicians included Thelonious Monk's "Round Midnight" featuring pianist Asherie, a rocket-propelled "Air Mail Special" by Benny Goodman, and Johnny Green's "Body and Soul" that sold us on the joy of jazz — at least those of us who weren't already sold.

From all reports, the Friday evening concert was equally enchanting with its living room informality and buoyant performances. Certainly the joy must have been palpable and blowing in the Florence wind because Saturday

evening attendance increased substantially.

The Saturday afternoon free concert was another matter. Nevertheless, the small crowd rocked with enthusiasm and applause for a thoroughly delightful hour.

The musicians were generous, explaining improvisation and melody and encouraging the kids to clap along. Clairdee sang "The Alphabet Song" straight, then scrambled the rhythm for a delicious soup of swinging letters.

Peplowski invited a half dozen little kids and one big kid on stage to share their talents and to illustrate stride piano. While Asherie played the piano, the kids followed the man with the licorice stick in a lively walk around the stage. Then the kids were asked to perform.

Young Rhianna didn't hesitate to claim her guitar and play and sing her own song, "Rain," a worthy composition, Peplowski allowed, to which the band improvised backup.

The big kid, estimable ukulele lady Janet Wellington, strummed the 12-bar blues with clarinet tootling on top.

Ella Fitzgerald was the Queen of Scat Singing, and Clairdee demonstrated the vocalise-make up words and nonsense syllables to swing with the rhythm.

Florence young lady Nyah Vollmar's scatting ability amazed the professional singer who engaged her in a remarkable scatting duet.

Meanwhile, pint-sized Connor was so fascinated by the drums that drummer Hobbs let the boy take a whack at all facets of the drum kit and presented him a pair of sticks.

When asked by a gentleman in the audience what he wanted to play when he grew up, Connor didn't hesitate to say he wanted to play jazz.

There you have it — from the mouth of babes. Jazz is here to stay, right here on the Siuslaw.

It's been decided.
See you next year!

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