

# Try a Little Tenderness

Even musicians need love

IF APRIL IS INDEED Jazz Appreciation Month, there's no better way for jazz fans to show their love for the genre than to track down Suzanne Cloud and give her money for her various causes. The Philadelphia-based singer with the bruised and husky voice behind albums such as *With a Little Help from My Friends* and *Looking Back* seems to be consumed by jazz at every turn; not just its sounds and sights but the care, feeding and tending to its less fortunate players and producers in the region.

Her Jazz Bridge Project (JBP, jazzbridge.org) with fellow Philadelphia chanteuse Wendy Simon-Sinkler is an all-volunteer, not-for-profit enterprise that seeks to raise cash and care for locals struggling with sickness, rent problems, drug addiction issues, legal hassles and all manner of debt. It does so not just by begging for money or throwing Kickstarter campaigns—both of which it has done and will continue to do—but through a series of shows in the area that it has booked, staged and promoted. This season of JBP from October 2012 through May 2013, is the organization's largest so far with more than 40 gigs throughout the region with venues like the Collingswood Community Center, the Cheltenham Center for the Arts, the Unitarian Church in Media, and the Kennett Flash in Kennett Square joining in the fun and the philanthropy.

Though Jazz Bridge gigs are one exception, in that they have always paid their series' musicians fairly, in general, jazz players are notoriously underpaid, working long hours for little cash. Without retirement benefits, health insurance or decent living conditions, many of Philly's jazz elders are staring at a bleak future.

Cloud and Simon-Sinkler act as a balm and a financial aid to musicians on the musical fringe. "We're still here helping professional jazz and blues musicians when they call in crisis," says Cloud of a constantly shifting set of needs that includes driving jazz players to gigs, picking up their prescriptions and food as well as bailing them out of all manner of troubles.

Jazz Bridge began on June 9, 2004 when Cloud's collaborator and pianist Eddie Green was sick and in need of doctor. "With one look, I knew he was seriously ill. I was a nurse for years—it was my day gig. It turned out to be pancreatic cancer, and he was dead a month later." Cloud did everything she could to keep him alive and thriving, from finding an emergency doctor to driving him back and forth. Though Green passed away, Cloud found her calling. Nine years later, problems are worse, but the spirit of giving is greater. "We'll be having our yearly fundraiser at Chris' Jazz Cafe on June 14 with pianist Elio Villafranca and band," says Cloud, excitedly. "And we'll be adding a new Neighborhood Concert Series next season at the Willingboro Free Library in Willingboro, NJ with Eguardo Cintron hosting."

More pressing to Cloud, at least where dates are concerned, is this month's debut of her play, *Last Call at the Downbeat*, dedicated to trumpeter/bop innovator Dizzy Gillespie's infamous stint at Philadelphia's Downbeat nightclub in November of 1942. Opening in the Red Room of the Society Hill Playhouse (507 S. 8th St, starting April 5), Cloud's *Last Call at the Downbeat* is done through the auspices of the 2013 Philadelphia International Festival of the Arts and its thematic take on time machines as a lens through which we can view the future.

"When PIFA put out the call for proposals with the time machine theme, I thought, gee, where would I like to go? Or better yet, where should I ask the Philly music community to go?" asks Cloud. Why wouldn't she consider this? Cloud also happened to be, at one point in her artistic life, a Philadelphia actress who hit the boards in such productions as *The Pajama*

*Game, Bell, Book and Candle* and *The Fantastiks*. Her last foray into local theater was in 1989 with *Sex Tips for Modern Girls*. "I honestly thought that I'd never look back, but here I am doing theater for heaven's sake." Cloud, whose outreach into all things historical, jazzy and theatrical came when she was a student at University of Pennsylvania. She received her PhD in American Civilization in 2003; her dissertation was *Children of the Earle Theatre: A History of the Philadelphia Jazz Community 1945 to the Present*. "I pitched the play to PIFA and they said yes."

With all that knowledge behind her, November 1942, Philadelphia's Downbeat and Dizzy Gillespie was a piece of cake. Cloud picked that moment in time because that's when Diz got fired by Lucky Millinder at the Earle Theater and turned around and got a small group gig right around the corner at the Downbeat Club, a famous jazz watering hole at 11th and Ludlow. "The time and place is only a few months before he's hired by Earl Hines where he fatefully hooks up with Charlie Parker," says Cloud, enthused by Dizzy's work on what he called "the new way" of bebop.

"The play I wrote is partially based on an early section of Al Fraser's great life history and biography on Dizzy called *To Be or Not*

*to Bop*," says Cloud. "I've talked to Al about the show, too, since we're both Penn grads. The whole show is going to be pretty hip if I survive it."

The playwright has a sensational local actor for *Downbeat*, Erin Fleming, who will play Dizzy, with trumpeter Duane Eubanks (guitarist Kevin's brother) doing all the music. There will be a multi-media presentation on scrim boxes with vintage photos of 1940s Philly, the Frankie Fairfax band and filmed shorts of 93-year-old drummer Charlie Rice—the only surviving member of the Downbeat house band—being interviewed.

How Cloud's *Downbeat* fits into her role with Jazz Bridge is simple math. Part of Jazz Bridge's mission is to advocate for and illuminate the history and traditions of jazz in Philadelphia. "The reason for this is that it is much easier for folks to donate to help musicians in crisis when they know how crucial jazz is and has been to our region's cultural scene," says Cloud. The Downbeat Club, at 11th and Ludlow, was special during the 1940s since it was the only integrated music club in Center City. For this, the Downbeat found itself constantly harassed by the police. "By focusing the play around Dizzy, I'm able to tell the story about a gifted young man from a rural town in South Carolina whose family had ties to Philadelphia. He experienced Philly first at the age of nine and was amazed at how integrated the city was; later, Dizzy would here to live with the rest of his family on Pine Street when he was 18 years old."

Audiences will experience the black music scene in town through Dizzy's eyes—the clubs, theaters, the black union, and the difficulties in living a life of jazz—Jazz Bridge's interests, and the reason it serves the community it does. That's where Jazz Bridge and the idea of *Last Call at the Downbeat* meet. "I always believed that the best way to illustrate the difficult choices an artist makes to pursue their art was with a multi-media, musical theater piece," says Cloud. "Nothing speaks to [an audience] like live people on a stage telling a story." ■

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