

The Jazz Bridge Project By Schaen Fox



Collingswood Community Center. Photo by Vicki Fox.

The Jazz Bridge Project is a nonprofit organization established by a group of caring Philadelphia area jazz musicians and fans dedicated to assisting professional Delaware Valley jazz and blues musicians and vocalists in times of crisis by providing confidential and caring support in keeping with their personal dignity. Through donations, grants, and music bookings, Jazz Bridge assists those coping with emergencies involving health, legal, financial, personal and professional needs, while building an awareness of the local jazz sound and the community of musicians who make it.

One of the co-creators of Jazz Bridge is Suzanne Cloud, a lady with a varied and interesting background. She spent 15 years in nursing. She is a professional singer and also teaches American Studies at Rowan University. I spoke to her after attending one of the organization's signature events, a neighborhood concert, led by Michael Pedicin Jr., in Collingswood, NJ.

She explained that the Jazz Bridge Project resulted from a medical crisis suffered by pianist and composer Eddie Green in 2004. His was a sadly familiar story; he had no resources when he learned he had terminal pancreatic cancer. As he was both her mentor and friend, Suzanne worked to smooth his last days. In that process, she had an epiphany. "This had to stop. It was a crazy way to deal with this kind of need, just throwing a benefit; tops they would get was maybe \$4,000 and that would be it. So they needed an advocate and a place to go to get the resources they needed right away. Why not do it as an organization? The person I thought would be the best person to work with me was Wendy Simon, another singer. We had come up working together in the city through the '80s and '90s. I called her

and said this is what I want to do and she said 'Sure.' We got people involved, got our 501(c)3 with some help from Law Works at Temple University. They did the whole thing pro bono, and that was the beginning of it."

One way Jazz Bridge has attracted attention is through a series of neighborhood concerts. Suzanne was running these events already and folded them into the new organization. These aren't fundraising events where musicians donate their talents. They are extra venues. "We guarantee each member of the band at least \$100, even if no one shows up in the audience. Depending on the head count, their take home pay goes up." For instance, after a recent success, each artist got \$230. Success, however, was not immediate. "Eddie played the very first one. We had 25 people show up. [Laughs] I sang and Eddie played. I struggled through two dicey years. All of it was if I fell short it came out of my pocket. I thought I wasn't going to be able to keep it up because I couldn't keep paying. I went to the Collingswood Town Council and said, 'Look I want to do this. Can you support me in



Denis DiBlasio, Brian Betz, Steve Varner, Suzanne Cloud and Jim Miller. Photo by Richard Timbers.

some way?' and Councilwoman Joan Leonard agreed to help. They were terrific. They said, 'We'll give you the room for nothing and you develop the audience.' The third year was the first I didn't have to take any money out of my own pocket. After that it has been running smoothly and we are paying for the room now." The money they take at the door goes to paying for the

room and paying the musicians. Jazz Bridge takes only 15% and that is when there is a good audience. "We do real well. I don't have any problem getting people. People beg just to have a place

to play. It's a magical experience. Most musicians aren't used to people who just sit there listening and know jazz. We pick a musician from that area so it is like neighbors meeting neighbors and having a creative exchange. You can talk to the artist, they are approachable. There are an awful lot of international jazz stars who live in the greater Philadelphia metro area. Artists like Tyrone Brown, Denis DiBlasio, Bootsie Barnes and Duane Eubanks have all performed for Jazz Bridge."

"I just heard from Odean Pope. He wants to work one. I got a phone call from pianist Hal Galper who lives in New York. I said, 'Do you realize this is a neighborhood concert?' [Laughs] He said, 'I heard it's a great place to play. The audience is great.' In fact [after his recent gig] Mike Pedicin called me the very next day and said, 'Sue that was such an incredible experience. How can I help Jazz Bridge?' We are replicating this idea in other towns. We are doing it in Cheltenham now and I've been talking to people in Bryn Mawr and Wilmington. I just met with the person who is head of economic development in Swedesboro and they're trying to do the same thing."

There soon may be many more happy jazz fans in South Jersey. You can get more information at the Jazz Bridge web site: www.jazzbridge.org

Schaen Fox is a longtime jazz fan. Now retired, he devotes much of his time to the music, and shares his encounters with musicians.



Quartet featuring Brian Betz. Photo by Vicki Fox.