

# LITCHFIELD JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY JIM MOTAVALLI

# MONHEIM TRIENNALE

BY KURT GOTTSCHALK

# CARAMOOR JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY MARILYN LESTER



Pasquale Grasso, Frank Vignola @Litchfield Jazz Festival



Rojin Sharafi @Monheim Triennale



Imani Rousselle @Caramoor Jazz Festival

The 30th anniversary (Jul. 25-27) of western Connecticut's Litchfield Jazz Festival (LJF) proved to be a testament to its success, as a natural outgrowth of Litchfield Performing Arts, which itself had for many years presented a classical series salted with dance, theater and jazz. Those jazz performances usually featured headliners such as Marian McPartland and Tony Bennett, among others, and the festival's reputation has exponentially grown since.

Bookending the full, middle day feast of talent was a Friday night opening with five-time repeat performer, pianist/jazz historian/catalyst **Emmet Cohen**; and four-time repeat visitor, pianist and vocalist **Champion Fulton**, who appeared at the closing Sunday jazz brunch. Moving the festival inside some years ago, to the Frederick Gunn prep school's air-conditioned auditorium, was never more appreciated than it was on this sweltering hot weekend.

The festival's day-long Saturday opened with a group led by bassist **Matt Dwonszyk**, a veteran teacher in the related Litchfield Jazz Camps that happen in the summer and culminate with the beginning of the festival each year. He brought on a surprise and welcome guest: two-time GRAMMY-winning vocalist and frequent LJF performer (as well as a Litchfield Jazz Camp alum) **Nicole Zuraitis**, in limber form after recording and releasing her *Live at Vic's* album in Las Vegas. She deploys a big voice with laser-like precision, elongating notes, scatting and bringing big smiles, including to Dwonszyk's face. The material covered the spectrum, from a version of "Jolene" (now a signature song for Zuraitis; it also featured an ominous arco intro by Dwonszyk) that would drop composer Dolly Parton's jaw, to a very uptempo take on Mongo Santamaria's classic "Afro Blue". Her bold but not brassy take on standards was apparent on "Close Your Eyes" (Bernice Petkere), and she did a wonderful job as well on the leader's original, a wishful "Peaceful World". Zuraitis was up front for most of the set, which resulted in a program likely quite different from what Dwonszyk's group performs sans a singer. His ensemble included Kris Allen (alto), Noah Baerman (piano), Jonathan Barber (drums) and Tony Davis (guitar), the latter who played an impassioned mashup of Pat Martino and Carlos Santana. Allen didn't get as much solo time as Davis, but he did reveal an individual post-bop sensibility, with perhaps the occasional but noticeable influence of Chris Potter. Baerman alternated between

In the ever-evolving, interconnected worlds of oft-hyphenated, improvisation-based subgenres, it's reasonable for music festivals to reflect anti-idiom trends. Major festivals such as Big Ears and Le Guess Who? and midsize ones, including Bang on a Can's Long Play and Loud Weekend, program more as fanciful curator than style avatar. The Monheim Triennale in the small city of Monheim am Rhein in western Germany, over a long weekend (Jul. 2-6), was likewise more a festival of communal and cultural exchange than any "file under" boundaries. Collaboration is *de rigueur*. It's a festival about building connections not just between invited "signature artists"—who come two consecutive years and often work together in the months between—but also with the Monheim community, something too rare among festivals on the fringes. The opening night concert was not only free-of-charge but brought together local players—some still school-age—in projects with the international artists. Sixteen signature artists were on the bill, joined at different times by any of over 100 invited local musicians.

The opening night, on a ship docked in the Rhine where the majority of the concerts were staged, included an exciting and inventive bass quartet tribute to Patti Smith. This was followed by the duo of Scottish small-piper **Brighde Chaimbeul** and NYC multi-instrumentalist **Shahzad Ismaily**, both signature artists, playing an abbreviated version of the set they played at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn the previous month. Chaimbeul is a phenomenal soloist; Ismaily is many things but one is being an absolute gift to his companions, adding depth to the center and shine on the edges. Their drones contained multitudes.

The signature project model made it a safer festival than last year's "prequel," during which the same set of headliner artists met in one-off encounters. Getting to witness German pianist-composer **Heiner Goebbels** and Palestinian hip-hop producer **Muqata'a** last year negotiating space to find temporary commonality was great fun. This year each was on more familiar ground. There was no lack of talent or wasted stage time but the 2025 edition was more exhibition than collision—which indeed might be a more marketable M.O. On the other hand, seeing Iranian electronicist **Rojin Sharafi** in her element, after being intrigued last year, was absolutely exciting. Hers was one of a number of sets built around cultural tradition: **Peni Candra Rini**, **Anushka Chkheidze**, **yuniya edi kwon** and **Julia**

For a single day every summer, the Caramoor Jazz Festival (CJF) swings, located some 50 miles north of NYC in Katonah, NY, on the exquisite 90-acre grounds of the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts, long a home to live music of all sorts. CJF was launched in 1994 and has been, for the last several years, presented in collaboration with Jazz at Lincoln Center (JALC). This year, over the course of a day (Jul. 26), attendees packed lunches, brought their folding chairs, blankets and picnic accoutrements and celebrated jazz. The start was at 12:30 pm, with continuous acts performing on four stages total, two at a time. For your fleet-footed correspondent, this meant a continuous circuit of zig-zagging from stage to stage: from the seated Spanish Courtyard and tented Venetian Theater, to the large Friends Field and smaller lawned Sunken Garden.

The day began at Friends Field with the **Imani Rousselle** Quartet. The vocalist—joined by Willerm Delisfort (piano), Jared Beckstead-Craan (bass) and Curtis Nowosad (drums)—announced her program as "songs I like to sing." Among them were "Mean to Me" and Juan Tizol's "Caravan" with a super-charged drum intro before the singer launched into a sexy, come-hither to my oasis interpretation. Rousselle offered a mellow vocal tone, pleasing personality and an adventuresome foray into Ellington's female crooner blues, "Creole Love Call". Then it was a run to the Sunken Garden with a family set by another vocalist, **Charles Turner**, a flamboyant LGBTQ performer, whose pleasant tenor with James Robbins' bass accompaniment provided an interactive instructional about "what is jazz?" for the kids, including exploration of "call-and response," "swing" and "improvisation" to tunes such as "Blue Skies" and "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)". Zooming over to the Venetian Theater it was time for JALC's Summer Jazz Academy Big Band under the batons of **Todd Stoll** and **Rodney Whitaker**. And this was a truly BIG band, some 20+ pieces manned by high school students from all over the country, who miraculously each got a chance to solo. Ultimately, the presentation was most about witnessing the future of jazz.

A real treat came in the elegant Spanish Courtyard with the **Dabin Ryu** Trio. Ryu is an up-and-coming pianist who was ably supported by Benjamin Young (bass) and Willis Edmundson (drums). Particularly welcome was her tribute to past piano giants such as Hazel Scott ("Peace of Mind") and Mary Lou Williams

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Ülehlä all presented forward thinking projects steeped in individual heritage. American saxophonist **Darius Jones** represented the blues and the spiritual in a solo set and in his composition “Samesoul Maker” for four voices and his saxophone. And Chaimbeul grinned her way through accompanying a German male chorus in a short and memorable selection of Scottish songs.

New Yorker **Selendis S. A. Johnson**’s “Reflections on the German Revolution (1918-1919 and more)” suggested forgotten activists and events in an evocative and energetic six-movement suite for octet. The piece didn’t suggest a narrative but elicited mood in a flow of thematic ideas. Johnson also played a set of solo miniatures on July 4th, linking American and German genocides and alternating between oration, trombone and vibraphone. That set was in a small, 1514 chapel where a succession of short solo and duo sets were presented. Swedish saxophonist **Mats Gustafsson** is such a forceful player that even beginning on flute he quickly filled the resonant chapel in a dedication to the recently departed Swedish free jazz pioneer Sven-Åke Johansson. Even his tongue slaps echoed, as if employing a digital delay. When he let loose on baritone, it was like a rhinoceros call. Singer **Sofia Jernberg**, Gustafsson’s frequent bandmate, gave a stunning solo recital of the sacred and extemporaneous, touching on French and Italian baroque songs and employing circular breathing in an uninterrupted, unaccompanied performance.

Three New Yorkers also made solo appearances in the chapel: bassist **Henry Fraser** filled the room with extended overtones, letting implications fill the air; **Darien Donovan Thomas** sang and played bells and amplified violin over a pre-recorded celestial soundtrack in a lovely meditation and vibraphonist **Joel Ross** played a set filled with nostalgia, favoring (as did Johnson) single-mallet technique. Sicilian saxophonist **Gianni Gebbia** played short études on a curved soprano, quoting standards and running effects through his phone to a small, wireless speaker – a perfectly-sized rig for the little church. Ismaili also acknowledged the American holiday with a spoken intro about the state of independence in the US before his “you are the other lung in my chest”, a piece that included two powerful poets, guitar, percussion and his own instrumental insertions. Even as a leader, he’s a generous bandmate, playing mastermind and support staff but not taking center stage (even though he actually was).

The double apex of the five days came in consecutive evenings at the Sojus 7 community center and **Peter Evans**’ Being & Becoming + Voices, with singers Jernberg, Alice Teyssier and Mazz Swift joining his quartet. Evans’ “more is more” credo notwithstanding, it was a book of compositions (different each night) making use of delicately composed passages but breaking into heavy duos and trios. A beautiful ballad for Jernberg with synthesizers was a happy surprise, suggesting Evans might have a place in league with some of the great songwriters (in a world where that’s recognized as Angelo Badalamenti, Henry Threadgill and the *Vampiros Lesbos* soundtrack). Goebbels gave a good old-fashioned, consistently disjointed sonic confrontation in a piece about a train station with ondes Martenot and bumblebee saxophone. **yuniya edi kwon**’s string quintet plus percussion came in waves of energy and stasis in a nightmarish piece about near death experience. And **Oren Ambarchi**’s 11-piece band included six guitars playing an epic Konrad Sprenger composition, which leaned into prog with processed grooves and a Giorgio Moroder vibe broken by blocks of Krautrock noise.

The festival concluded in church on Sunday with local composer **Rabih Lahoud** leading an improvising ensemble, Colors of Unison, as well as the audience in joyful stomping and simple chants, bringing rounds of participatory energy to the festival’s final half hour.

For more info visit [monheim-triennale.de/en](http://monheim-triennale.de/en)

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(INTERVIEW CONTINUED FROM PAGE 6)

**BAN:** In 2018, an organization in Timisoara (the biggest city in western Transylvania), which produces concerts, said: “In three years Timisoara is becoming a European capital of culture, and as you know, Bartók collected folk songs in Transylvania, so would you, maybe with one of your collaborators, develop and reimagine this collection?” I was stunned by what I found. Between 1907 and 1917, Bartók brought back in a book over 3,600 songs and he called it his life work. It changed the way he composed. I’ve discovered an extraordinary repository from more than 100 years ago, a music that I didn’t know because folk songs from his collections did not survive. I’ve never recognized any one of them. Only once in our touring of Romania, the mom of somebody recognized one song and she was in her 80s.

When Mat and I accepted the project, which was over three years—and it involved workshops, commissioning—we both said whom we would like to invite, and immediately we both said the same name, John Surman, without even discussing it. We both loved John’s music for decades. And we also knew that with John Potter (of Hillard Ensemble) he investigated John Dowland’s folk music of England and several other projects. There’s a certain pastoral quality to Surman’s playing that comes out of the folk music of England. He has this uncanny way of playing the melody of folk songs in his own language and his own voice, but still maintaining the unique quality that makes the folk song a folk song. So he was an ideal partner for our project, as we would discover after that year, 2018, when we workshopped for nine days in Timisoara; we rehearsed and then we recorded *Transylvanian Folk Songs*.

**TNYCJR:** That’s a wonderful record.

**BAN:** But what happened, as we got to tour after the pandemic, is that John was extraordinary with us in that he didn’t act like a special guest, especially given his stature compared to us. He was fully immersed and it became an organic trio. And the music grew immensely. We feel so lucky, Mat and I; it’s one of the highlights of our musical careers. After starting in 2021, we got to tour Europe and play major halls and festivals, which was very nice. And the repertoire that we recorded in Timisoara changed radically over four years of touring, to such an extent that we had to give different titles to these melodies. We basically stopped playing the themes. Even though we had the set list, somebody would start playing a motive from the original theme, and then we were gone.

**TNYCJR:** And this is what is on the two superb new recordings of the trio, *Cantica Profana* and *The Athenaeum Concert*.



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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS  
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**Monday Night Jam**  
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**BAN:** It’s a major release event for Sunnyside Records because it’s both a CD and vinyl, and each one contains different material. The CD contains recordings from several festivals and concerts in Europe between 2022 to 2023. These recordings are from Strasbourg Jazz Festival, Luxembourg and Switzerland. We played many more festivals but these were recorded pristine multi-track. And then the vinyl is a recording from June 2024, one of John’s last concerts because he retired from touring. It was done in this stunning venue, the Romanian Atheneum in Bucharest.

**TNYCJR:** Usually performance codifies music, whereas this is the opposite, it’s changing all the time.

**BAN:** Exactly. Over these years of touring the music changed drastically and it became something else. A lot of extended techniques that none of us were doing in 2018 came to life, I think out of the sheer force of Bartók’s folk songs. What we discovered is that Mat can bring influences and techniques that he was using from different parts of the world all together, like South Korean or Indian or African stuff that he plays on viola and they work with folk songs from Transylvania. I started using a lot of extended techniques in terms of approaching the piano, like muting the strings and using it as a percussive instrument, or like some sort of cimbalom or dulcimer. So we would go in places that we didn’t before. John was almost trying to play microtonal too, because Mat was playing microtonal so much. It’s one of his marks. All this happened in these years of touring and it changed the music and it changed us.

**TNYCJR:** So, with John Surman no longer touring, what does that mean for the future of the Bartók field recordings project?

**BAN:** Well, we’re doing another installment this year with Gerald Cleaver and a great bass clarinet player from Rome, Marco Colonna, and we’re in talks to do another installment if we find the presenters and the interest. People keep wanting to do it because the projects come out really nice and powerful. We’ve been talking with trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire, with some other people too, to see if we can make it work in the future. And I’m looking forward to touring again with Alex Harding early next year, and with my group Elevation as well, in Europe.

*For more info visit [lucianban.com](http://lucianban.com). Ban plays duo with Mat Maneri at Barbès Sep. 13. See Calendar.*

**Recommended Listening:**

- Alex Harding & Blutopia – *The Calling* (Jazzaway, 2005)
- Albrecht Maurer, Lucian Ban, Mat Maneri – *Fantasm (The Loft Sessions)* (Nemu, 2012-13)
- Mat Maneri, Evan Parker, Lucian Ban – *Sounding Tears* (Clean Feed, 2014)
- Alex Harding/Lucian Ban – *Dark Blue* (Sunnyside, 2018)
- Lucian Ban – *Ways Of Disappearing (Piano Solo)* (Sunnyside, 2021)
- Lucian Ban, John Surman, Mat Maneri – *The Athenaeum Concert* (Sunnyside, 2024)

(CARAMOOR CONTINUED FROM PAGE 12)

(“In the Land of Oo-Bla-Dee”). Ryu can be mightily percussive in an outdoor setting, but she also has nuance and a keen interpretive awareness of what she’s playing. She also has plenty of soul. Back at the Sunken Garden, tenor saxophonist **Sisonke Xonti** brought his South African jazz sensibilities to the fore and, with bassist Tim Norton, created a synergy of voices. Norton explored the outer limits of his instrument from drumming with his bow to testing the tensile strength of its strings. The pair went through a cycle of tones and rhythms, pulling out a litany of tech stops on their respective instruments

along the way. It was over to Friends Field for the **Luther Allison** Trio with Mikey Migliore (bass) and David Alvarez III (drums) supporting the pianist. This youthful ensemble played a trad combo set employing the tried-and-true trio formulae on such standards as “I Didn’t Know What Time It Was”. And just as yours truly was departing to catch the next act, on came the morning’s singer, Imani Rousselle!

That next act was a surprising disappointment, especially for the august stage of the Spanish Courtyard. The billing was the **Jazz House Legacy Band**’s “Pays Tribute to Sarah Vaughan” set. But, as the seven members of the band entered, the leader announced there was no singer and that the program would be altered. The quality of the music offered pointed to moving on. That decision led to one of two festival highlights: **Jerron “Blind Boy” Paxton**, a vocalist, raconteur, historian and multi-instrumentalist specializing in blues and jazz from pre-World War II. At one point, as he tuned his 1848 banjo, Paxton delivered an entertaining discourse on the Reconstruction era, race relations, and, of course, music, playing “Old Dog Blues”. Switching to harmonica he played an astounding, sound-effects-filled “Muscle Shoals Blues” and then on piano, a hearty “Michigan Water Blues”.

In Friends Field, a *Groundhog Day* moment was experienced with vocalist **Hannah Gill** and her sidemen, Luis Salcedo (guitar), Philip Ambuel (bass) and Adam Ray (drums) offering a set of languid standards. Gill delivered “Hard Hearted Hannah”, “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To” and a laconic version of Ellington’s “Love You Madly”. In the Sunken Garden, trumpeter **Adam O’Farrill** and harpist **Maeve Gilchrist** played a succession of seemingly random sounds, Gilchrist sometimes stumming her instrument, but more often assaulting it to deliver an atonal sonic palette of plucks and jabs along with riffs, blasts and squonks from her partner. The second highlight of the festival appeared in Friends Field in the form of drummer-percussionist extraordinaire, **Obed Calvaire**, with Godwin Louis (alto), Emmanuel Michael (guitar), Harold St. Louis (keyboards), Addi Laffose (bass) and Delisfort (piano). The group played the music from Calvaire’s 2024 album, *150 Million Gold Francs*, a musical exploration of Haiti’s “tragic past.” Selections included the title track, as well as “Just Friends” and “Haiti’s Journey”. Miami-born, the leader is of Haitian descent, and his and the group’s amazing artistry and cohesion came through in every selection, which included, at times, chants, ritualistic and Caribbean references, and, of course, a vibrant display from this virtuoso revealing the power of the drum, recalling Ellington’s 1959 suite, *A Drum Is a Woman*. Calvaire may have been leading a group under a tent on a stage in a grassy field, but he took us all to church.

The evening headliner in the Venetian Theater, **Arturo O’Farrill and the Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra**, travelled north to perform at Caramoor the day before their Birdland Sundays gig. There was a great deal of narrative about the legacy of Afro-Cuban rhythms and much about his father, Arturo “Chico” O’Farrill (1921-2001), the Cuban composer, arranger and conductor, proponent of “Cubop” and a force in Latin jazz in New York. There were long homages, such as to “Mother Africa”, a long discourse on “what is Latin music,” because Latin America is a very big place after all, and a very long symphonic work by the leader. As the night grew long, audience members began to dribble out, perhaps eager to beat the traffic or exit the parking lot before that simple act got bogged down in logistics.

The take-away of this year’s CJF was that of surprising disappointment, particularly since the festival was curated by the august JALC. Lacking well-known and/or established artists, there was a serious lack of wow-factor and vibrancy. Still, it was a pleasant day out and attendees, especially those with young’uns frolicking on the lawns, were having a great time socializing to a jazz-infused musical backdrop.

*For more info visit [caramoor.org](http://caramoor.org)*

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distribution and retailer experience.

So how has Thanatosis been financed in its almost decade-long existence? “Mainly I’ve used money I’ve earned from playing concerts and touring,” explains Zethson. “The musicians most often contribute themselves, but the exact terms depend on if there’s financial support from somewhere, and for example if I have initiated the project or not. Thanks to a still existing, yet rapidly declining, governmental support for culture, I’ve sometimes been privileged enough to get partial funding from the Swedish Arts Council, and in rare instances other foundations,” he adds. “To record on Thanatosis is a misleading description since most often I receive raw or final mixes,” he clarifies. “I’m getting requests from all over the world; some of them who seem really tuned-in to the label profile feel a musical kinship to it and want to be a part of the catalogue.” Adds Ogura, “(It’s) one of the best organizations I’ve ever worked with. There’s a strong sense of trust, professionalism and hospitality.” As for formats, Zethson says: “I love CDs, they’re a piece of cake to produce, plus they don’t take up much storage space and are cheaper (than vinyl) to send.”

Releases are available through Border Music/Redeye Distribution and on most streaming platforms, but Zethson cautions that might soon change. “I value the physical format far more highly and the streaming platform industry is generally exploitative and problematic in so many ways. Streaming doesn’t at all contribute in any mentionable way to sales. Bandcamp on the other hand is an extremely important tool to reach out with the music and to get some sales. I’m doing physical albums and trying to break even or even go to the plus side, so Bandcamp’s selling tools are a huge value.” While more projects are scheduled for this year, there are no designated tenth anniversary plans (except for perhaps a celebratory live event in Stockholm). The new sessions include a collection of all of Helmut Lachenmann’s solo piano pieces in honor of his 90th birthday, produced by Ogura. Thanatosis is, after all, a boutique label.

Zethson notes: “I’m not interested in appealing to as many people as possible. I’m just trying to create something specific with the catalogue and a whole that follows one or a few very different threads.”

For more info visit [thanatosis.org](http://thanatosis.org)

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

at Marty’s nightclub in New York. Bassist Rufus Reid was brought in, subbing for Tormé bassist, George Duvivier. Reid recalls that Tormé was initially dubious at the switch, but after assurances from Duvivier, hired him and says that during the gig “it was cool.” Reid adds, “He was a great singer, but he was a hell of a musician...man, this guy had great pitch; he would do an *a capella* thing for almost two minutes, which is a very long time. Then he would finish the phrase and hold out a note, then bring us in. It was always right on the money!”

The late pianist George Shearing had a long association with Tormé and in a 1997 interview with this writer, Shearing explained “in the 1950s, I used to hang out in clubs where we both played. I’d go to hear him and he’d come see me.” They would get together after the shows, playing various tunes. In the ’70s, impresario George Wein put them together at Carnegie Hall for a series of concerts and in the spring of 1982 the pair began recording and touring, which produced six acclaimed albums for Concord Jazz. Shearing said, “I think it’s probably one of the best musical marriages in the business. That man has incredible ears. If I make one change in harmony, because I thrive on spontaneous harmony and changing harmony around

to suit my mood, Mel is on it within an eighth note. You don’t find that with many people.” Pianist-singer Billy Stritch, with his then trio, Montgomery, Plant and Stritch, was their opening act in 1988 at Carnegie Hall. “He couldn’t have been nicer to three kids from Texas,” Stritch says, “and he even greeted my entire family afterward.” Another child prodigy, vocalist Nicolas King shared Tormé’s longtime music director, the late Mike Renzi. King says, “Mel was always among my favorite crooners as a kid, and my appreciation for him only grew when we began doing a lot of Mel’s material. Mel’s musical brain was brilliant, and he heard things that no one else did. When he landed on a certain note, or had an intellectual and soul satisfying arrangement, or take on a song — there’s nothing better.”

Tormé’s career essentially ended after his first stroke in August 1996. Maye met up with him for a visit in his dressing room after his Music Hall concert in Kansas City in June 1996. “As always, when we met, we discussed music, work and laughed a lot,” she remembers. “He was so generous and kind. I must say, he was extremely tired. I’ve never forgotten a remark he directed to me as I was walked down the hall of the theater dressing room area. He called my name and as I turned to answer him, he said, ‘Marilyn,’ and he pointed his finger at me, ‘You take very good care of yourself.’” On August 8, 1999, less than three years later, Mel Tormé passed into musical greatness.

*“Mel Tormé at 100: A Celebration with Billy Stritch and Nicolas King” is at 54Below Sep. 12, 14. For more info visit [54below.org](http://54below.org). See Calendar.*

**Recommended Listening:**

- Mel Tormé — *Gene Norman Presents Mel Tormé at The Crescendo* (Coral, 1954)
- Mel Tormé — *With the Marty Paich Dek-tette* (Bethlehem, 1956)
- Mel Tormé — *I Dig The Duke - I Dig The Count* (Verve, 1961)
- Mel Tormé & Buddy Rich — *Together Again - For The First Time* (RCA, 1978)
- Mel Tormé — *Live at Marty’s/Encore at Marty’s* (DCC, 1981-82)
- George Shearing/Mel Tormé — *An Elegant Evening* (Concord, 1985)

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intense Bill Evans-ish reflections to a funkier approach on a Nord Stage 3 digital keyboard.

The late afternoon included the musically simpatico duo of New York-based guitarists **Frank Vignola** (Long Island, New York) and **Pasquale Grasso** (Ariano Irpino, Italy). Some years and geography separate their origins, but when it comes to performing standards, there’s no barriers. Vignola is an established force with more than 30 albums, while Grasso has had a meteoric rise since moving to the US in 2012. The pair were constantly grinning and pointing at each other during virtuosic trading-off treatments of tunes including Jimmy Campbell, Reg Connelly’s 1928 “If I Had You” (with a nod to Bucky Pizzarelli) and the 1918 Layton, Creamer classic, “After You’ve Gone”. On the latter, the tempo started slowly but was soon soaring with flying notes that were each clearly articulated. As a generalization, Vignola sticks closer to the melody and Grasso wildly improvises, but somehow always makes it back to home base. The younger Grasso is the slightly warmer presence, but both have deep respect for what these songwriters of their day accomplished and left them to improvise from and to share with admiring if not astonished listeners. The duo’s art was most on view for their treatment of “Deep in a Dream” (Van Heusen, DeLange), which has been undertaken by everyone from Chet Baker and Frank Sinatra to Buster Poindexter. It’s inherently a beautiful ballad, but they played it with incredible delicacy, tackling its


implications but staying true to the song. Solo slots had Grasso dissecting “Embraceable You” (the Gershwins) with total aplomb, and Vignola merging “Moonlight in Vermont” (Blackburn, Suessdorf) with “Polka Dots and Moonbeams” (Van Heusen, Burke) in a seamless blend. The set closed with a rousing version of Edgar Sampson’s early ’30s hit “Stomping at the Savoy” as well as Mark Stefani’s recent “Inside Out”, a tribute to jazz guitarist Jimmy Bruno.

Modern technology has allowed clarinetist **Anat Cohen** to perform untethered from a stationary microphone. As the Saturday headliner (it was her fifth year to play LJF), Cohen used that mic freedom of movement dramatically. She was in constant motion around the stage, dancing, gesturing and crouching with a soloist the way a rock star might. Her records may be wonderful, but one really doesn’t get to truly know her music until seeing her perform live. The selections on stage were mostly from her Quartetinho group’s second album, 2024’s *Bloom*, performed by her astounding ensemble, with all three sidemen doubling on second instruments: Vitor Gonçalves (piano, accordion), Tal Mashiach (bass, guitar) and James Shipp (vibraphone, percussion). Each member also writes and are credited as co-creators of much of the band’s music, including “Superheroes in the Gig Economy” and “Coco Roccoco”; Mashiach was featured on acoustic guitar for his “Paco”, a tribute to the late Spanish guitarist Paco DeLucia. The poll-winning Israel-born bandleader noticeably has Middle Eastern influences (and klezmer) blended into her sound, but Anat Cohen has also absorbed and mastered pretty much most to all mainstream to avant garde jazz, which she incorporated into another very personal and exciting LJF presentation.

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