

FESTIVAL REPORT

JAZZFEST BERLIN

BY JOHN SHARPE



Barry Guy @Jazzfest Berlin

FABIAN SCHELLHORN

HUDSON JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY THOMAS STAUDTER



Caity Gyorgy @Hudson Jazz Festival

DAVID MCINTYRE



Of the Blues: At the Savoy © Licensed by Romare Bearden Foundation

Universal Temple of the Arts STATEN ISLAND JAZZ FESTIVAL 37

SATURDAY, DEC 20, 2025

St. George Theatre • 7 pm
35 Hyatt Street
Staten Island, NY 10301

FEATURED PERFORMERS

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THE AFRO LATIN JAZZ
ENSEMBLE

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Jazzfest Berlin remains one of the most prestigious events on the European jazz calendar. Over four days (Oct. 30-Nov. 2), the 62nd edition presented 24 concerts featuring 120+ musicians from over 20 countries. But try as you might, you couldn't see everything. Although most acts played on the main stage, some concurrent programming in nearby venues necessitated tough choices and speedy transitions by festival-goers.

Two of the absolute standouts graced the central hall. Trumpeter **Wadada Leo Smith** joined pianist **Vijay Iyer** for a set that radiated quiet intensity. Two luminous figures in near darkness, they began a dialogue that felt both ritualistic and exploratory. Smith has attained that rarefied level where he melds economy of expression with attention to timbre and attack, his spacious, blues-infused phrasing honed to a flashing edge. Equal parts accompanist, foil and lead, Iyer moved between acoustic piano, Fender Rhodes and electronics, shifting textures with unerring instinct, whether laying a velvet harmonic floor, erupting in earthy counterpoint, or unveiling an ominous ambience. Even without overt route maps, the partnership achieved a perfect equilibrium, conjuring drama and form in a moving performance capped by a standing ovation.

Similarly, rapturously well-received **Barry Guy's** London Jazz Composers Orchestra unleashed a blockbuster rendition of "Double Trouble Three", featuring at its heart the twin pianos of special guest pianists **Marilyn Crispell** and **Angelica Sanchez**. Fifty-five years after its founding, Guy steered the 18-strong outfit through a score wherein orchestral heft collided against prickly small group improv—waves of sound intersecting, crashing and breaking, demarcated by whipcrack interjections. Part of his genius lies in weaving features for each person into the overall fabric, but ensuring the frames and their contents contribute to the development of the piece. Mette Rasmussen's alto burned and pleaded, Andreas Tschopp's trombone flared and tail-gated, while Torben Snekestad raged on soprano. Crispell and Sanchez, as often entwined as alone, prompted, responded and provoked in communion rather than competition. Through it all, the leader summoned a cinematic sweep, a majestic Spanish-tinged melody glinting at the work's emotional center as it wielded an undeniably visceral punch. Guy's command of the bass came into sharp relief in the intimacy of the A-Trane club the following night, joined again by Sanchez, along with drummer

The Hudson Jazz Festival (Oct. 3-5) was, for a first-time visitor, an appealing experience: this charming and picturesque upstate city is known for its antique shops, art galleries and restaurants, so walking from one show to another and trying to catch as many of the performances as possible was an excellent way to size up the burg's style and spirit. The three nightly headlining acts—the Julius Rodriguez Group, Caity Gyorgy Quartet and Joel Ross' Good Vibes—took the stage at Hudson Hall, an historic edifice built in 1855 and converted over the years from city hall to opera house, and which is now operated as a center for the arts. It's a fully restored gem of a venue. The rest of the festival's 26 performances were part of its "Sounds Around Town" series, so-called "pop up" events at smaller venues, mostly eateries and bars located up and down (or a block or two off) the mile-and-a-half-long Warren Street, Hudson's main drag that parallels the adjacent, scenic Hudson River. That's how festival goers got their "steps in": by hoofing it from one show to another. Along the way, there was plenty of time to window shop and ogle the Queen Anne and Greek Revival architecture of the quaint post-Federalist structures that have helped make Hudson such an attractive destination for weekends, a revitalization going back to the 1980s.

On the surface, the Hudson Jazz Festival is a modest, regional attraction. Now in its eighth year, yet lacking the world-renowned superstars on multiple stages you'd find at larger, more entrenched festivals, it's an event that instead celebrates the improviser's art at a more basic level and gives the audience an opportunity to experience a wide variety of jazz styles in an intimate fashion. This was certainly true with the "Sounds Around Town" performances, which featured instructors, alumni and students from nearby Jazz at Bard (College) program and was curated by faculty members in pianists **John Esposito** and **Angelica Sanchez**. The assortment of venues for these "pop ups," some more appropriate for presenting music than others, indicated a real community buy-in for the festival, and genuine local pride as well. Residents and visitors alike were out in force, and the ticketed shows in the evenings at Hudson Hall were all sold out, more on the strength of the festival itself, it seemed, rather than on the artists' creating that draw. Much of the music was exciting, vibrant and entertaining.

The festival's range of offerings was evident from

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“I was just there last week playing with them...we’ve listened to the same music our whole lives and we’ve studied the same music and looked up to many of the same musicians...There are weird, shared connections that you have with people all over the world when you start to talk about music and the arts that don’t need to be site specific.” The two other international affairs include Canadian guitarist Kevin Brunkhorst’s quintet album, *After the Fire*, a forward-looking, seven-tune suite initiated by an early COVID-19 era house fire that created deep reflection, and *Onta*, from Scottish drummer Alyn Cosker, a sprawling, sometimes ambient assemblage with vestiges of homeland tropes involving 16 musicians.

Back home, the Calligram founders think Chicago is in another heyday “in terms of the quantity of high-quality musicians, including a lot of great upcoming young musicians in different corners of the scene,” adds Bradfield. “I’ve been here on and off since 1988, and this is the strongest the scene has been. There’s no comparison. You probably have to go back to the ’70s to find a comparable scene in Chicago. It’s a hub.” While it’s still true that NYC remains a magnet for aspiring jazz musicians, Chicago has welcomed back many. Bradfield notes: “There was a time when that talent drain was inevitable, but I don’t think that’s true anymore. I see some of the reverse happening or people saying, hey, I don’t like paying \$3K a month and living with nine other dudes in my 30s. Maybe Chicago is not so bad!”

Bradfield and McCullough’s goals are to release eight albums every year. Essentially, they receive ready-made product inquiries that they ultimately judge for inclusion. After successful years creating their artistic community and producing their selective offerings via Calligram, the two have plenty of reason to look forward to 2026.

For more info visit calligramrecords.bandcamp.com

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Ramon Lopez. Over two sets, charts from the bassist and pianist served as springboards for quicksilver conversations in which Guy’s caressed slurs swelled into abrupt squalls, and Sanchez’ tempestuous flurries presaged reflective lyricism. The bassist drew a full arsenal of colors from mallets, metal rods, bow and volume pedal, while Lopez threaded tabla flourishes through his restless pulse. Their collective exuberance was infectious, mirrored in an enthusiastic crowd held rapt by the volatile interaction.

A rammed Quasimodo staged two electrifying shows, the first closing the opening night, featuring saxophonist **Tim Berne**’s trio with Gregg Belisle-Chi (guitar) and Tom Rainey (drums)—the group behind *Yikes Too*, appearing under the name Capatosta. The lineup’s small scale belied its reach: Rainey’s endless rhythmic sleights dissolved any sense of fixed meter, while Belisle-Chi matched with tones that chimed, splintered or snarled in turn. Berne’s alto traced long, wiry lines that expanded on his written themes in solos, which rarely boiled over but nonetheless scalded. The resultant exchanges married power, precision and attitude into a fertile *ménage à trois*. Four days later, closing the festival, saxophonist **James Brandon Lewis**’ quartet delivered a performance no less compelling. Thoroughly road-tested at the end of a two-week tour, the band was both relaxed and cohesive. Exposure had done nothing to dull the way in which they tackled the repertoire, ranging from whispered prayer to impassioned anthem, with Lewis in particular liable to explode in overblown urgency. Aruán Ortiz (piano) spoke in shards and echoes that at one point settled into a hypnotic groove reminiscent of Craig Taborn in his pomp, abetted by Brad Jones (bass) and the elastic interplay of Chad Taylor (drums) with his rhythmic

appetite for adventure.

Opening night’s electricity crackled from German alto saxophonist **Angelika Niescier**’s Beyond Dragons trio, a taut and combustible alliance with Tomeka Reid (cello) and Eliza Salem (drums). It proved a tour de force curtain raiser and a fitting vehicle for the leader’s unspooling runs and sudden rhythmic pivots, as crisp detonations and tappy invention vied with tensile unisons adorning multipart compositions. Other festival highlights included guitarist **Mary Halvorson**’s Amaryllis sextet, glistening with labyrinthine shimmer and rhythmic elegance, sparked by the constituent voices asserting exuberant disorder within the wily architecture. Vibraphonist **Patricia Brennan**’s Breaking Stretch septet united percussive complexity with vaulting horns. They barely let up throughout an effervescent set, in which the leader’s inspired writing carved niches for concise, characterful solos, with saxophonists Mark Shim and Jon Irabagon particularly noteworthy. Danish reed player **Signe Emmeluth** conducted Banshee, her seven-woman ensemble, through a quick series of artfully arranged vignettes, which thrived on astringent contrasts. Plentiful doubling of instruments and copious electronics guaranteed a rich palette, but especially striking was one episode where everyone abandoned their instruments for a strident vocal interlude, made all the more memorable by live processing.

It was perhaps singer **Amirtha Kidambi**’s Elder Ones who most directly confronted the question animating this year’s festival: where do you run when the world’s on fire? Her fierce vocal imprecations—lifted by the entangled saxophones of Matt Nelson and Alfredo Colon and grounded by the loping pulse of bassist Lester St. Louis (bass) and Jason Nazary (drums)—transformed a call to action into cathartic art. Otherwise, the conviction repeated throughout the panel discussions with participating artists was that music with improvisation in its DNA was itself a continuing act of resistance, one shared and supported by listeners. Under the discerning leadership of Nadin Deventer, Jazzfest Berlin affirmed that such music endures as both refuge and a rallying cry.

For more info visit berlinerfestspiele.de/en/jazzfest-berlin

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the get-go. Guitarist **Miles Taylour Sweeny** led a trio through a punchy extended jam in the outside dining area of a small, homestyle eatery, before settling into a swinging “On the Sunny Side of the Street”. Moments later, **Julius Rodriguez** was thrilling a much larger audience at Hudson Hall, his quartet full of hard-charging confidence as it ran through material taken from the leader’s sophomore Verve album, *Evergreen* (2024). His gospel-fueled piano playing, often reminiscent of Herbie Hancock, anchored melodies that gave Brandon Volel (trumpet) lots to remark on, with Philip Norris (bass) and Joshua Watkins (drums) totally on the mark throughout. Their tribute to Roy Hargrove, “Where Grace Abounds” (from Rodriguez’ 2022 debut album *Let Sound Tell All*), was simply stunning, with astonishing piano runs that delighted the audience. Afterwards, about half the crowd then tramped over to the Second Ward Foundation’s education center (in a converted school) for a dance party led by **BIGYUKI** (aka Masayuki Hirano), a Japanese keyboardist-producer known for his entrancing musical collages. Festival curator Cat Henry bravely hit the dance floor first, and soon afterwards it was packed.

The “Sounds Around Town” commenced early on Saturday morning at the Farmer’s Market, where the **Phat, Inc.** quartet, led by electric keyboardist Leo Belsky with vocalist Ondina McDonald, delivered slinky interpretations of Erykah Badu and Lenny Kravitz, while tenor saxophonist Maxwell Barnes added solos

and punctuations that sounded like Ben Webster. A phenomenal guitarist, **Sam Bernhardt** led an energetic trio in a pocket park and then joined a group with Adriana Tampasis (flute), Justin Geyer (keyboard) and an inventive Marco Spodek (drums) in a different park on the eastern end of Warren St.—their surprise-filled set, laden with group improvisations, recalled early Return to Forever and It’s a Beautiful Day. Back at the pocket park, the **Aquarium** quintet, with Steven Bonacci (saxophone) and the superb Michael Knox (bass), gathered a nice crowd, as did vocalist **Sivaan Barak** at a nearby restaurant. Barak handled the blues, Brazilian sambas and the classic “Walk On By” (Bacharach, David) in exquisite style, while pianist Nico Bald wrestled with a misbehaving spinet.

Acclaimed in Canada, where she has earned three JUNO Jazz Album of the Year awards, vocalist and composer **Caity Gyorgy** (last name pronounced “George”) surely won a bevy of new fans. The Saturday night marquee concert with her quartet was a cornucopia of enchanting songs, mostly originals, often advancing in jaunty and swinging rhythms to spotlight her formidable scatting and precise enunciation. She slowed down for a beautiful, show-stopping reading of “April Fooled Me” (Kern, Fields) accompanied just by pianist Mark Limacher, which belied her youth: her timbre, the way she sold the song, how she held the final note, they all suggested the Calgary native is already a deep soul and undoubtedly heading toward global jazz stardom. Woozy from such musical excellence, some audience members staggered eastward and packed into a small theater space with the younger Bard musicians to hear bassist **Tristen Jarvis**’ Deep Tones for Peace quartet. Backed by a surging rhythm section, tenor saxophonist Ishmael “Drew” Martin exploded with energy and brio, his tumult of Trane-like ideas and dizzying notes eagerly applauded.

A third day was a test for sore feet. **Maia Jarrett**, an appealing vocalist, fronted a trio with her father, virtuoso bassist **Noah Jarrett**, and pianist Leo Belsky on the sidewalk outside a community center; back down Warren St., **John Esposito** (piano) and Tarik Shah (bass) ran through standards such as “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” at a restaurant; and Sam Bernhardt was back at the pocket park with his trio. In mid-afternoon, **Alphonso Horne & The Gotham Kings**, another one of the festival’s top attractions, brought a raucous, New Orleans party to The Caboose, a sun-filled performance space at the west end of town. The trumpeter-vocalist took the audience on a journey from Louis Armstrong traditional jazz to the popular sounds of Stevie Wonder with stops along the way for gospel, a Latin-tinged “St. Louis Blues” and Crescent City mainstay “Big Chief”, with C. Anthony Bryant’s powerful baritone lifting several songs. Pianist William Hill III introduced “St. James Infirmary” with a Bach-inspired cadenza while tenor saxophonist Boyce Justice Griffith sparred with Horne throughout. A joyous “When the Saints Go Marching In” concluded the set, naturally, with the audience parading through the ‘Boose behind the two horn players.

The festival finale that vibraphonist **Joel Ross** delivered with his Good Vibes quintet at Hudson Hall took the audience on a less familiar journey than the other featured artists. He built long melodies that sounded like the soundtrack to an epic film, dug into riffs before tacking back out and created sustained loops of music that were like Möbius strips with his band mates. Pianist Micah Thomas took charge on occasion, the rhythm section in full boil, and Ross engaged in some cat ‘n’ mouse playing with him. But without discernible song forms or structures, the music stood as a challenge to the audience—and a tacit acknowledgement that the world of jazz encompasses a freedom of expression that can be as simple as one note struck on the vibraphone over and over and over again.

For more info visit hudsonhall.org/event/hudson-jazz-festival