

TD JAMES MOODY JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY ANDREW SCHINDER

MUSIC UNLIMITED

BY BILL MEYER

WASHINGTON HEIGHTS JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY ELIJAH SHIFFER



Kate Kortum @TD James Moody Jazz Festival



Akira Sakata @Music Unlimited



Camila Cortina @Washington Heights Jazz Festival

It may seem like an overstatement to imply that nearly three-quarters of a century of jazz history could be distilled into a single instrument. And yet, with a certain Abraham Prescott double bass, crafted in the early 19th century and once owned and played by legendary bassist Scott LaFaro (who died in a car crash in 1961 at age 25), it most certainly is. And that very bass was among the most honored guests at the 2025 TD James Moody Jazz Festival, held in Newark, NJ, last November (Nov. 8-23). Newark-born LaFaro is just one part of the city's rich jazz history. Named for another of Newark's jazz sons, saxophone icon James Moody (with 2025 marking Moody's centennial), the festival mostly took place at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), itself located at the intersection of Wayne Shorter and Sarah Vaughan Ways (two more Newark scions).

On the festival's opening day, piano luminary **George Cables**, spry and energetic at age 81, led a classic piano trio at Newark's Bethany Baptist Church, joined by Alexander Claffy (bass) and Jerome Jennings (drums). The Church's Jazz Vespers, a critical organization championing modern and classic jazz in the Newark area, co-sponsored the performance. Jazz Vespers—co-founded by Dorthaan Kirk, "Newark's First Lady of Jazz," NEA Jazz Master and former WBGO personality (and widow of legendary multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk)—brings world-renowned jazz musicians to Newark to perform free concerts, reminding the audience of the music's inherent spiritual nature. "When we started Jazz Vespers, one of my missions was to bring artists to New Jersey that normally wouldn't come here," said Kirk. "My hope has been to not only expose the leaders, but also to many 'side persons' who are as equally accomplished, and I want the audience to know exactly who they are hearing." There could not be a more suitable performer to represent the Jazz Vespers than Cables, who was a perfect fit for the gorgeous church setting. "The design of the [Church] is great, lots of African art, it's really beautifully built," said Cables. "And the audience is great, very responsive, so I love playing there." Cables is a classy, consummate showman, and even at his relatively advanced age demonstrates an impressive nimbleness at the keys. The set was an elegant mixture of standards and originals, including a dreamy rendition of Duke Ellington's "Prelude to a Kiss" and the

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Nomenclature does not necessarily equal destiny, but if you're going to program music that pushes back, it doesn't hurt to present it in a building called the Old Slaughterhouse. Translated from German, that's the name of the Alter Schlachthof in Wels, Austria. The space, now repurposed as a cultural center, has been the main venue of Music Unlimited since the festival's 1987 inception. Early on, it presented free jazz and improvised music from the middle of Europe, but over time its scope has widened without compromising that commitment to improvised and improvisation-adjacent music. *Music Unlimited* 39 (Nov. 7-9) presented an international lineup of free music veterans as well as performers rooted in punk, rock, classical and experimental music. The event, which sold out before opening night, had a strongly communal vibe, with an audience full of repeat attendees who converged from points across Europe. Likewise, certain musicians come back again and again.

Among this year's returnees were **Mats Gustafsson** and Akira Sakata, both of whom presented established ensembles that set the bar of accomplishment quite high. The Swedish woodwinds player's Fire! trio was joined by Australian Oren Ambarchi (guitar) and their set exemplified how musicians who are well acquainted can spur each other to dig deep and even deeper. Ambarchi has not only played with Fire! before, but his group Ghosted shares the same rhythm section. Johan Berthling (electric bass) and Andreas Werliin (drums) stuck to the Fire! rhythmic playbook throughout, sustaining a steady, swaggering backbeat augmented by percussive accents, some subtle and others quite strident; this is one improvising combo that heeds the command, "more cowbell." Gustafsson's long tones and gnarled wails on tenor reinforced that primal stomp; his peppering, overblown flute playing was more quietly electrifying. Initially Ambarchi's guitar, run through a table full of effects, issued swells closer to what one might expect from an organ. But as the sound swirled in and around the groove, it became more prismatic, splitting into a splendidly psychedelic splay of cirrus high frequencies and molten plastic lows.

Akira Sakata, who turned 80 last year, played twice in one day. During an afternoon set at a music school recital hall, he enacted a ritual retelling of *Tale of Heike*, a story of civil war set in medieval Japan. His

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Vocalist Louise Rogers and pianist Mark Kross are a power couple at the forefront of jazz in Washington Heights ("upstate Manhattan"). As the founders of the Jazz WaHi organization, they program several hundred gigs and jam sessions every year, ensuring that the area north of Harlem cannot be ignored among NYC's many hyper-local neighborhood jazz scenes. Jazz WaHi's biggest event is its annual Washington Heights Jazz Festival (WHJF), which late last year celebrated its eighth edition (Nov. 6-9).

By featuring local musicians nearly throughout, this festival is focused squarely on neighborhood community—even more so than the nearby Inwood Jazz Festival. The sense of community is particularly accentuated by Jazz WaHi's choice of venues: mostly restaurants and bars within roughly a ten-block radius. The festival's centerpiece was its 12-hour marathon of music at Le Chéile, a pub restaurant on West 181st St., which also played host venue to WHJF's opening show: a comfortable, polished set by vocalist **Paul Jost**, with Jim Ridl (piano), Jay Anderson (bass) and Donald Edwards (drums) providing versatile accompaniment on a mix of standards and R&B classics.

The second day's festivities were at two restaurants where Jazz WaHi also presents music regularly throughout the year. At 181 Cabrini (across the street from Le Chéile), pianist **Emiko Hayashi** and her trio with John Loehrke (bass) and David Picton (drums) swung hard on two sets of standards and originals with an authentic bebop, hard-bop sound. At Kismet (a few blocks north on West 187th St.), the site of Jazz WaHi's weekly jam session, **Louise Rogers** and **Mark Kross** hosted a special edition of their session—with Ethan O'Reilly (bass) and Jeff Potter (drums) completing the house band—featuring many players who would headline in the following day's marathon. Like the Inwood festival, this Heights gathering included an interactive show for children, which was led by Rogers at the beginning of the Le Chéile marathon, with Kross (piano), Rick Strong (bass), Kaori Yamada (drums) and guest tap dancer Adante Power. Rogers' combo reduction of (what else?) Ella Fitzgerald's "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" sounded somehow just as massive as the original Chick Webb big band arrangement.

The first headliners of the marathon featured the allstar **Mark Sherman/Mike Clark Quartet**

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with Sherman (vibraphone), David Kikoski (piano), Ugonna Okegwo (bass) and Clark (drums). This group romped through standards with a heavy-hitting swing, maintaining a high energy throughout, without overplaying. Violinist **Sara Caswell** followed, leading a quartet with Jesse Lewis (guitar), Matt Aronoff (bass) and Michael W. Davis (drums) on songs from her latest album *The Way To You*—bright-toned contemporary jazz with an emphasis on folk-song melody. Pianist **Camila Cortina**'s quintet's virtuosic set included modern Afro-Cuban jazz, driven by rising star drummer Zack O'Farrill. The vocal/piano duo of **Marianne Solivan** and Brandon McCune showcased the former's warm, vibrato-laden sound and the latter's whirlwind of inventive lines. A more contemporary ensemble sound followed, with a quintet led by up-and-coming guitarist **Noah Myers** and anchored by master bassist John Benitez. Pianist **Yotam Ishay**, 2025's winner of Jazz WaHi's annual composition competition, featured a chamber-jazz septet. His pieces formed little scenes like a film soundtrack, with much of the excitement coming from soloists Meg Okura (violin) and Hillai Govreen (clarinet). The marathon's penultimate set was by the **Prism Trio**: Nicki Adams (piano), Eddy Khaimovitch (bass) and Evan Hyde (drums). They displayed a lighter but a just-as-driving shade of swing as Sherman and Clark's opening set (particularly in Adams' Herbie Nichols-flavored opener "Berenson"). The marathon's exciting capper was the debut of the **Jazz WaHi Big 'Nuff Band**, a project evolved from reading sessions within the weekly Kismet jam as a showcase for local arrangers and including several of the band's members. This septet (with guest vibraphonist Alex Strong) was really a miniature big band rather than an expanded combo. Many arranging styles were on display, from a bare-bones '60s Blue Note sound on tenor saxophonist Berta Moreno's "J.G. Power" to full-on "cool school" for alto saxophonist Chris Peebles' take on Jerome Kern's "Pick Yourself Up".

The final day began at The Bonnefont, a restaurant in Fort Tryon Park, where **Adam Asarnow** (piano) with Lauren Hendrix (bass) played two elegant, charming duo sets of standards. Nearby St. Frances Cabrini Shrine was the location of the festival's closing performance: WaHi resident **Miguel Zenón** (alto) and Jason Yeager (piano) played a set of Antônio Carlos Jobim compositions. This wildly creative duo reimagined obscure and familiar Jobim songs alike, with plenty of intricate rhythmic interplay (especially on a playful, abstracted version of "One Note Samba") while still leaving plenty of room for melody.

One unexpected theme united the entire festival: many groups explored relatively lesser-known or rarely played works of jazz legends, all of which were very satisfying to hear live. Such notable "good calls" included Hayashi's versions of Horace Silver's "The St. Vitus Dance" and "Juicy Lucy", Myers' Latin arrangement of John Coltrane's "After The Rain" and Lauren Hendrix' features on Oscar Pettiford's "Laverne Walk" and Thad Jones' "Three and One" (very uncommon in a small-group context). The Big 'Nuff Band's opener and closer were also in this category: Woody Shaw's "The Moontrane" and Bud Powell's "Oblivion".

What really made WHJF work was the high level of professionalism in Jazz WaHi's programming. Every musician got the respect deserved, with no set feeling more or less important than any other. The festival managed to make all the restaurant and bar locales seem just as exalted as any concert hall. To Rogers and Kross, a show is a show, regardless of setting.

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original “Melodious Fun”, dedicated to Thelonious Monk (whose son, T.S. Monk, Jr., was in attendance in the pews).

Demonstrating the diversity of the Moody Festival, bass superstar **Stanley Clarke** and his band 4EVER was the next day’s highlight. Eschewing Cables’ subtlety, Clarke instead treated the NJPAC crowd to a big, booming, jazz-rock concert, but nevertheless paid great respect to the roots of his fusion output. “I’m a fan of all jazz festivals,” he said. “It’s a really important art form that’s unique to this country. It’s very important to keep something that was invented here alive. Now I feel a resurgence. One man’s jazz is another man’s R&B or swing, but the common denominator that goes through all those various forms is improvisation, the spirit of play and playing together.” That collaboration was on full display in Clarke’s set, as the NEA Jazz Master led a band featuring young, dynamic musicians who were more than capable of keeping up with the leader’s virtuosity. In addition to Clarke, Cameron Graves (piano, keys), Colin Cook (guitar) and Jeremiah Collier (drums) rounded out the 4EVER band, with Collier’s brother, rising (if not risen) saxophone star Isaiah Collier joining the band for this performance. The band’s set list consisted mostly of rock-oriented interpretations of jazz standards, notably Charles Mingus’ “Goodbye Pork Pie Hat” (which was basically unrecognizable from the original, but was nevertheless exhilarating, the band injecting extra blues-driven power into the classic, with Clarke riffing on his electric bass as if it were a standard electric guitar). Drum legend Lenny White then joined for the band’s version of Joe Henderson’s “Black Narcissus”, with Isaiah Collier proving more than capable in tipping his hat to the late saxophonist-composer Henderson. Naturally, Clarke ended the set with his iconic “School Days”, joined by bassist Ben Williams, who had opened the prior set with guitarist David Rosenthal. While Clarke played his electric bass during the song, Williams played the legendary LaFaro bass, in a memorable blend of classic and modern styles.

The festival’s variety additionally included tap dance icon **Savion Glover**, which turned out to be arguably the most fascinating of its programmed performances. Glover, whose style of tap is percussive rhythm, showcased his band, PROjECT.9., featuring saxophonists Jalin Shiver and Alex De Lazzari and vocalist Zakiyyah P. Modeste (aka Sista Zock), as well as Glover himself on drums. Not surprisingly, he demonstrated nearly as much prowess as a percussionist as he does with his tap shoes, spending the first half of the two-hour performance solely behind the drum kit. The band nevertheless kept listeners enraptured with a Glover-composed, free jazz-funk exploration, a meditation on the nature of sound that has defined his career and legacy. Following the musical component of the journey through sound, the leader then donned his tap shoes and treated the audience to an absolute tour-de-force: a nearly one hour non-stop, completely improvised dance marathon. The audience left, ironically, in stunned silence. “Exploiting sound and the most important element of our existence, to me, is the fact that everything starts with a sound that no one else can hear, and that is the sound that is in our brain,” said Glover. “I refer to that as the psychological silence.”

The LaFaro bass was once again put to good use by someone absolutely worthy of its magic: NJPAC Jazz Advisor, bassist **Christian McBride**, who performed with his Big Band. McBride as always radiated joy and optimism, and his band, featuring longtime collaborator, saxophonist Ron Blake, crisscrossed jazz eras, exploring both traditional swing as well as modern funk. Three celebrated vocalists joined the band during their set: Andra Day, José James and

Ledisi, the latter who brought the house down with renditions of “Caravan” and “Let’s Do It” (from her excellent, recent release, the Dinah Washington tribute *For Dinah*). McBride briefly swapped out the LaFaro bass for electric on James’ funky-up “Trouble” and Day absolutely illuminated the stage with her version of Ellington’s “Solitude”.

The annual Sarah Vaughan International Jazz Vocal Competition (aka The SASSY Awards) culminated the festival. The competition is truly a star-making event, with past winners including Jazzmeia Horn (2013), Samara Joy (2019) and Tyreek McDole (2023), the latter who performed a striking, bluesy rendition of “Willow Weep for Me” during the intermission of this year’s competition. WBGO’s Gary Walker hosted the event, which featured judges McBride, Ann Hampton Callaway, Jon Faddis, Nnenna Freelon and Janis Siegel, whom had the unenviable task of choosing among finalists Diamond Princess Franklin, Emma Smith, Julia Moscardini, Kate Kortum and Candace Jones. The finalists each demonstrated their worthiness of the award and the bright future they each have, regardless, in the jazz vocal realm. Backed by the piano trio of Sergio Salvatore (piano, musical director), Gregory Jones (playing the LaFaro bass) and Gerry Brown (drums), Houston-born **Kate Kortum** eventually took first place with her stunning renditions of “Easy Come, Easy Go”, “You Are There” and “What a Little Moonlight Can Do”, while London-born **Emma Smith** took second place with a vampy, humor-filled performance. Upon the festival’s conclusion, the LaFaro bass headed to its next destination: teaching young musicians at NJPAC’s Milt Hinton Institute for Studio Bass next summer.

For more info visit
njpac.org/series/james-moody-jazz-festival

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recitation may not have communicated the narrative details to non-Japanese speakers, but his growling delivery, interspersed with stark percussion, clarinet and alto saxophone passages, made the emotional stakes quite clear. That evening at the AlterSchlachthof, Sakata reunited with Chikamorachi, an American rhythm section comprising Darin Gray (bass) and Chris Corsano (drums). The trio first convened 20 years ago, and while their long-form improvisations aren’t as aggressive as they once were, they’re just as compelling. Alternating between his two horns, Sakata was clearly in command, chasing down and elaborating upon melodic and textural notions, while his younger accompanists adroitly reframed his blowing by reaching deep into their collective catalog of extended techniques.

Another afternoon program took place at a chateau at the edge of town, celebrating the enduring musical and personal partnership of Dutch woodwinds player **Ab Baars** and violist **Ig Henneman**, who introduced their set with a confession that the duo was celebrating a combined age of 150 (the festival’s organizer gave them a bouquet and a bottle at the end). In between, there was no sign of fading abilities during a series of free improvisations that reconciled his unflinching scrutiny of tonal extremes with her more tempered management of microtonality. In a solo set, French saxophonist **Sakina Abdou** used spatial consciousness, circular breathing and strategically placed multiphonics to create a trance state that erased one’s sense of time as she moved patiently about the room.

Two of the festival’s wildest sessions came from a pair of bi-continental quartets, each with its own Dutch septuagenarian on board. **Archer** includes Norwegians Jon Rune Strøm (bass) and Tollef Østvang (drums), American Dave Rempis (saxophones) and

Terrie Ex (guitar). The guitarist’s kinetic presence and brutal technique, which included wedging objects into his strings and sawing at a pillar with his instrument’s neck, might seem merely theatrical – but he could not get his abrasive, arcing sounds any other way; each feat was as musically necessary as it was visually entertaining. The music grew through a paradoxical process of subtraction, getting more exciting as players dropped out to make way for closely engaged duets. And in JaJeWeDa, sound poet **Jaap Blonk** met his flamboyantly absurd match in drummer Weasel Walter. The pair stalked and mocked each other while the combo’s other two members, Damon Smith (bass) and Jeb Bishop (trombone, electronics), played the role of serious-as-your-life straight men. The comedic gestures again consistently paid musical dividends as they white-knuckled it on the edge of chaos.

The sound of the mostly Lisbon-based **Turquoise Dream** couldn’t be more different than these other groups, but the ensemble also enacted cross-genre and cross generational fertilization. Septuagenarian violinist Carlos Zingaro and a combo of much younger players: Helena Espvall (cello), Marcelo dos Reis (guitar) and Amsterdam-based Marta Warelis (piano) engaged in chamber improvisation rooted in a respect for subtle gestures. But as the collective’s intensity built, woody sonorities gave way to a Sonic Youth-like sound tsunami driven by the guitarist’s mallets-on-strings technique. Turquoise Dream was just one of a host of multi-national units with singular methodologies. The French-Swiss-German quartet **Trapeze**, which comprises Abdou, Matthias Müller (trombone), Peter Orins (drums) and Joke Lanz (turntables), repeatedly molded a coherent rhythm from a scrum of thrusts and ripostes, only to cast it away and start searching anew. The Austrian-Serbian trio **Flowers We Are**, on the other hand, was all about staying the course. Matija Schellander (electronics), Arnold “noid” Haberl (cello) and Marina Džukljević (harmonium) occupied discrete positions within a varied but implacable drone. As the players projected signals that alternately attracted and repelled each other, the layered sound grew more and more turbulent.

Endless Breakfast, which includes New Yorker gabby fluke-mogul (violin), Brazilian Mariá Portugal (drums) and Argentine Paula Sanchez (cello), improvised an extraordinarily wide-ranging set of rosin-powdering scrapes, barely-there whispers and impromptu scraps of song. Their set was both a homecoming and a foreshadowing: the band was first conceived two years ago in the Alter Schlachthof’s green room, and drummer Portugal will be the festival’s guest curator in 2026.

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