

NOMAD JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY HARI ADIVAREKAR

JAZZ EM AGOSTO

BY STUART BROOMER

MONTCLAIR JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY ANDREW SCHINDER



Godwin Louis @Madison Square Park



Joachim Kühn @Jazz em Agosto



Patrice Rushen @Montclair Jazz Festival

There are many hands that coax a music festival to life. The hands of a curator, the organizer, the stage hand, the sound engineer, the security personnel, the sponsor, the custodial staff, the hands of the maestro shining an inner voice into the outer world. These many hands were reflected in the second annual NoMad Jazz Festival (Aug. 2-8), presented in partnership with The Jazz Gallery, Flatiron NoMad Partnership and the Madison Square Park Conservancy. The festival weekend was held at Madison Square Park (but with the first day cancelled due to a raging thunderstorm) with 39 performances—a week's worth and more—held across 12 venues, featuring 146 artists, plus a dozen local food stalls, and almost every performance was free.

"New York's greatest cultural experiences should be available to everyone. Free festivals remove barriers and invite people of all ages and backgrounds to discover artists they may never have heard before," said Miriam Dalaei Fodera, NoMad Jazz Festival's Executive Director. This view was echoed by NYC Parks Commissioner Tricia Shimamura, who presented the festival organizers with a special citation from NYC Mayor, Zohran Mamdani, and added, "World class art, music and culture changes you, connects you, transforms you—that should be for everyone."

In the week leading up to the festival weekend, NoMad Jazz held a string of standalone concerts, including a gentle and reflective conversation between two deeply sensitive musicians, guitarist **Bill Frisell** and trumpeter **Ambrose Akinmusire**, at the neighboring Baruch Center for Performing Arts. The duo started off with tonal utterances and monosyllables, gradually building their way to full sonic sentences. This was mature playing that was full of ease, patience and mutual listening.

Festival Artistic Director, Rio Sakairi, already a legendary NYC figure (working behind the scenes for almost three decades at The Jazz Gallery), commented, "I generally don't think in a thematic manner. I'm always thinking about the audience, what the space feels like. I'm interested in creating moments of joy, understanding and connection. I just close my eyes and imagine what it would feel like if I were there."

The start of this year's festival with Frisell and Akinmusire showcased this intention with clarity. In secondary venues, **Craig Handy & Second Line Smith** and the **Matt Chertkoff Trio** played free gigs at the

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Jazz em Agosto, presented by Portugal's Gulbenkian Foundation, is a special event, from Lisbon's nighttime breezes to the state-of-the-art music that regularly makes up its programming. The festival retains a timetable and performance spaces that it has enjoyed for decades, with a continuity marked by the grace of its principal setting, an amphitheater brushed by illuminated trees with the sounds of ducks and frogs arising from the woodland background. The music represents the vision of its artistic director Rui Neves, who has programmed the festival for some 40 years, his ear still keenly attuned to the shifting soundscape of jazz, balancing a reassuring consistency with a creative edge, a match definitely apparent this year.

The festival has a consistent structure, starting on a Friday night and running for ten days, one concert per day, with two per day on weekends, scheduled around the first ten days of August (this year Jul. 31 - Aug. 9). While the 2026 edition's special emphasis was on American music, there was significant input from Europe and Portugal itself. The opening solo concert was by German (Ibiza-based) pianist **Joachim Kühn**, who at 85 has lost none of his intensity, inventiveness and sheer virtuosity. Jazz-focused, Kühn's virtuosity intimates other roots too, with his creative energies suggesting the foundational eras when Bach, Mozart and Beethoven were keyboardist-composers regularly improvising their own cadenzas. Kühn can build vast edifices in sound, but he can also opt for melodic directness, here offering a composition by Ornette Coleman (a former collaborator) for an encore. Near the festival's conclusion, a similarly titanic solo pianist appeared: **Pat Thomas**. As much a spontaneous composer as improviser, he demonstrated comparable but distinct energy, matching a bright percussive clarity to dense layers of polyrhythmic invention.

The quality of Lisbon's own music was apparent in several performances. A distinguished big band, **L.U.M.E.** (Lisbon Underground Music Ensemble), led by keyboardist-composer Marco Barroso, celebrated its 20th anniversary with music that was at once complex, witty and engaging. The expressionist duo of organist **David Maranhã** and tenor saxophonist **Rodrigo Amado** works at the opposite pole in terms of mood, Maranhã creating a roaring, electronic backdrop while Amado constructs his own epic onslaught—rapid bursts of melody, dense multiphonics and impassioned roars—all coming at the edge of chaos and control, apocalypse

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The Smithsonian Institution has, since January 2025, become unduly and misguidedly politicized. Nevertheless, the Institution continues to find ways to fulfill its mission. In commemorating the 250th anniversary of the founding of America, the Smithsonian included the 17th annual Montclair Jazz Festival (MJF) as part of its "Of the People: The Smithsonian Festival of Festivals" celebration. Held in the forward-thinking suburb of Montclair, NJ, the MJF embraced the partnership with the Smithsonian, and in doing so honored the diversity, creativity and ingenuity of America and its true native art form of jazz. Its climax, named "Downtown Jamboree" (Aug. 15) billed itself as the largest free jazz festival in the New York metropolitan area, and it showcased a lineup of crowd-pleasing, populist acts that emphasized joy and pleasure.

MJF began as an offshoot of Jazz House Kids (JHK), an organization based in Montclair that provides top-level jazz musical education to area youth, and in particular fills in the gaps left by school districts that lack the funding or resources to deliver such instruction. JHK also continues to present and produce the festival. At the Downtown Jamboree, JHK had its own stage, showcasing the immense talents of its students, which receive instruction from established jazz artists, including trumpeter Ingrid Jensen (who leads the all-female-identifying Chica Power Big Band) and saxophonist Birsã Chatterjee (who also serves as JHK's Education Program Coordinator).

JHK, and subsequently MJF, was founded by Melissa Walker, who serves as President. Walker's husband, bassist Christian McBride, is currently Artistic Director of both JHK and the festival, which began as a somewhat spontaneous gathering in a local park with JHK students. Soon after, pianist Monty Alexander became the MJF's first outside professional performer, and the festival has since grown exponentially from there (this year's edition had an estimated attendance of 32,000).

"What's so wonderful about the festival is it really just grew organically," Walker said. "It grew out of us doing what we do in our mission, which is to provide performance opportunities for kids to explore and grow in this music. When you think of the pillars of the organization, it's all about creating access. And so we make sure that the barriers to play this music, to hear this music, to be a part of it, are reduced as

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masterfully invoked.

Another standout Lisbon musician, guitarist Luis Lopes, appeared in the otherwise French quartet **Bonbon Flamme**, with Valentin Ceccaldi (cello), Fulco Ottervanger (piano) and Étienne Ziemniak (drums), the music at once indescribable and vastly entertaining, sometimes supplying kitsch melodies with abstract detailing and sometimes dizzying evolutions, suggesting, without resembling, Frank Zappa's furthest adventures.

A different European quartet, **The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters**, devoted its 90-minute set to a single extended improvisation. Much of it reached levels of intensity touched by few other performers, notably in the coruscating, vocalic solos of alto saxophonist Mette Rasmussen, rising over the onslaught of Mariam Rezaei's turntables, Lukas König's drums and synthesizer, and piccolo trumpeter Gabriele Mitelli's additional electronics. The price paid for the one-piece set came in the collective longueurs that sometimes set in following Rasmussen's heroics.

Otherwise, the bulk of the festival had a definite American flavor, just as the festival has previously highlighted other specific jazz cultures. First up was **Canyon** with Sylvie Courvoisier (piano), Lester St. Louis (cello), Joe Morris (bass) and Jerome Deupree (drums). Canyon's commitment to a single set-long piece was more effective than Rasmussen's, marked by subtle, sustained, detail-rich interaction moving fluidly through a broad range of tempos, densities and moods.

The purest distillation of a jazz ethos came from the duo of poet **Fred Moten** and bassist **Brandon Lopez**, reducing their materials to the fundamentals of speech and bass, enhanced and extended with computer, looping and a drumstick tapped on a mic stand, in the process creating one of the richest performances of the festival, with Moten repeating and reworking a poem's key phrases into the insistent and authentic sub-text of jazz, all in lock-step with Lopez' richly creative lines.

Several of the primarily American groups had a strongly compositional focus, presenting meticulously crafted work from recently released recordings. **Anna Webber**, playing tenor and flute, led her band Shimmer Wince in a series of subtly-detailed pieces that highlighted the inventiveness of her regular associates: Adam O'Farrill (trumpet), Mariel Roberts (cello), Elias Stemeseder (synth) and Lesley Mok (drums). **Ches Smith** revisited the compositions of his *Clone Row* album with the original performers, Mary Halvorson and Liberty Ellman (guitars), Nick Dunston (bass, electronics) and Smith himself moving among drums, vibraphone and electronics. The performance was a superb realization of complex music, filled with dense interlocking detail, all coming together with a special spark from the interaction of the contrasting guitarists.

Comparable virtuosity prevailed in drummer **Tomas Fujiwara's** *Dream Up*, with Ches Smith appearing again on vibraphone, Kaoru Watanabe on the large taiko drum and Japanese flutes, and Kweku Sumbry adding African percussion as well as melodic elements with balafon, a wooden xylophone and the ngoni, a banjo-like string instrument. The result was a global village of diverse sounds and dancing rhythmic invention.

Among groups performing on the festival's final day, the **Chicago Underground Duo** of trumpeter Rob Mazurek and drummer Chad Taylor created hand-in-glove music with a warmth reflecting their longstanding commitment to the minimalist band. The performance went somewhere else completely, however, with the surprise addition of tenor saxophonist **James Brandon Lewis**, who was also working in the area (Taylor being a regular member of Lewis' quartet). Such spontaneous groupings are seldom a part of the festival, but this one was a transformative moment, with the saxophonist pressing the music from intimate to explosive.

For more info visit gulbenkian.pt/jazzemagosto/en/

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WED 10/14	Anastasiya Petrova Organ Trio Asen Doykin Band	7:00PM 10:15PM
THU 10/15	Joe Farnsworth Quartet John Sneider Quintet	7:00PM 10:15PM
FRI 10/16	Jason Tiemann Quartet Sam Dillon Quartet	7:30PM 11:00PM
SAT 10/17	Jeff Rupert Quartet Richard Cortez Band	7:30PM 11:00PM
SUN 10/18	Michael Wolff Trio Eloise Carter Quartet	6:30PM 9:30PM
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was where he was. They were partners in crime in that sense. They were both pushing the envelope, looking for the next evolution. Miles pushed me to listen to Schoenberg and the twelve-tone system. Years later, when I started writing my memoir, I went back and listened to Schoenberg. In the second movement of his Violin Concerto, I heard what sounded to me like my melody for “Decoy”, which I had written years before Miles had shared that music with me.

I felt that maybe Miles had intuited that I was already channeling this music. Gil once said that [I soloed] like an arranger. Even then, they recognized something in the way I formulated music. It makes me think about how much musicians can hear in us before we completely understand it ourselves.

NYCJR: I liken that recognition as a “soul song” — hearing a few notes and somehow feeling that you already know them. Would you additionally connect that feeling to resonance?

IRVING: It’s like harmonic resonance. A sympathetic string on one guitar can cause a string on another guitar to resonate at the same frequency. There’s something that happens there, and it’s magical. It’s physics in a way. But it’s consciousness too—physics and consciousness coming together in a way that makes you stop and respond. It happens with audiences. We’ll reach a high point and somebody will say, “I cried when I heard that.” You don’t necessarily know why you’re crying. Something touches you at a very deep level.

We played a concert in Senegal, and afterward a graduate student from the Congo came up to me. He said that the music we had played didn’t exist anywhere in Africa, but it was as if we had read their emotions and played them back to them—emotions they didn’t even know they had. That is what this music is about. It’s reflecting back. It’s about heart. Miles once told me, “Don’t play a single note unless you really need it.” He wanted us to show up with authenticity and intentionality and express whatever was coming through us. It was always pure.

NYCJR: Did Miles behave like someone who worried about whether what he was doing qualified as jazz?

IRVING: Oh, no. Not at all. He didn’t really like to use the word “jazz,” per se. He struggled with how to define the music. At one point he was just calling it social music. I remember seeing him with Wynton Marsalis, and Wynton was quoting these different Miles Davis phrases he had learned verbatim. I chuckled. Miles had moved so far beyond that because he wasn’t trying to preserve anything or repeat anything. It was always about keeping it fresh.

By the time I left the band in 1988, things had begun to change. Miles was getting into Prince and minimalism, and things became more repetitive. That was probably part of the reason I left when I did. It wasn’t as interesting for me. But the larger lesson remained: Miles kept moving.

NYCJR: Did he talk about John Coltrane?

IRVING: He did. He loved Trane. He mostly talked about the fact that John played such long, long solos. There’s the story about Miles asking Coltrane what he was thinking when he played these very long solos. Trane said something to the effect that he was searching for something and wasn’t sure how to get out of it. Miles said, “Why don’t you try taking the horn out of your mouth?!” That was something Miles would repeat in sessions. If somebody were playing too much, he might stop the tape and say, “When we’re finished, I’m going to let you out of here. You

don’t have to play your way out.”

He respected Trane to a very high degree, while he was also critical when things weren’t distilled down to fewer notes. He said the same thing to me: “You probably write one song that could be ten songs. There are ten songs in one composition of yours.” So it was about distilling things down and getting to the essence.

NYCJR: After all these years, what remains unfinished for you in understanding what Miles gave you?

IRVING: My biggest regret is all those moments we didn’t document. We didn’t have cell phones or selfies, and I have very few photos with him. Now I understand the importance of documenting everything possible with this band going forward, because it’s valuable to be able to pass that along to another generation with empirical knowledge—with something on film, something recorded. I’m moving into documentary work myself. I’m motivated and excited, and I have so much gratitude for what Miles imparted to me. I continue to unpack those lessons on a daily basis.

For more info visit robertirvingiimusic.com. “The Miles Davis Centennial Celebration” is at 92NY Oct. 17 featuring M.E.B. with Robert Irving III and fellow Miles band alumni including Vince Wilburn Jr, Antoine Roney, Darryl Jones and Munyungo Jackson. See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Miles Davis — *Man With The Horn* (Columbia, 1980-81)
- Miles Davis — *Decoy* (Columbia, 1983)
- Miles Davis — *Rubberband* (Warner/Rhino, 1985)
- David Murray — *The Tip* (DIW, 1994)
- Wallace Roney — *Jazz* (HighNote, 2007)
- Robert Irving III — *New Momentum* (Sonic Portraits Entertainment, 2004-2007)

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much as possible, all the way to having a no-tickets-required festival.”

In keeping with the theme of America’s Semiquincentennial, the festival presented each performance as representative of a different American city that played a crucial role in the development of jazz, starting with the **Spanish Harlem Orchestra** (SHO). Representing NYC, the SHO (led by pianist Oscar Hernández) kicked off the Downtown Jamboree, rousing the audience with a percussion-driven, energetic salsa jam. The group featured three vocalists (Jeremy Bosch, Marco Bermudez and Carlos Cascante) engaging in rich, complex harmonization. A galvanizing version of “A Night in Tunisia”, which featured a blistering trumpet solo by Alex Norris, was a set highlight.

Singer and NEA Jazz Master **Dianne Reeves** represented The Motor City of Detroit; the versatile vocal legend generally stuck to rock and R&B vernacular, kicking off with a soulful, jazz-inflected cover of “Dreams” (Stevie Nicks), featuring a Latin beat by drummer Terreon Gully. “Café”, a mainstay of Reeves’ setlist, demonstrated her brilliant vocal range and included acoustic guitar by Romero Lubambo (whose Brazilian heritage informed his accompaniment) and an upright bass solo by Reuben Rogers.

The festival’s representative cities naturally included New Orleans. The **Take Me to the River New Orleans All Stars** did NOLA proud with their exuberant, spirited performance, which stuck to the modern side of New Orleans jazz and featured legendary native, percussionist and vocalist Cyril Neville (as well as other members of the Neville family,

including Omari Neville on vocals and percussion, and Ian Neville on guitar). The set included a rousingly funky cover of “Hey Pocky A-Way” by The Meters, of which Cyril’s older brother Art was a founding member.

Vocal and keyboard superstar **Patrice Rushen** has radiated West Coast cool for over five decades, and her LA roots were all over the Downtown Jamboree stage. Rushen was recently named an NEA Jazz Master, and MJF held an onstage ceremony honoring the achievement, with fellow Jazz Masters Reeves, Terri Lyne Carrington, Billy Hart and Regina Carter recognizing Rushen’s accomplishments. The performance hit all the expected notes, spanning her jazz and fusion beginnings to her transition to pop and R&B stardom. The set included such beloved classics as the electro-funk jam “The Hump”, the smash hit “Haven’t You Heard”, and, of course, her signature “Forget Me Nots”. On the jazz side, the groovy instrumental “Kickin’ Back” recalled her early-career jazz fusion output, her electric keys filling in the spaces between Enzo Iannello’s wah-wah guitar and Andrew Ford’s funky bass. “I always try to put a together a show that offers joy and musicality,” Rushen said.

Philadelphia was in the house for the **Christian McBride Big Band**’s closing set. The band performed songs exclusively associated with Philadelphia. As always, they delivered a distinctly modern take on the big band idiom, while still honoring the format’s history. Their version of John Coltrane’s “Equinox” featured tenor saxophonist Nicole Glover’s characteristic virtuosity. McBride himself held it down on his original “The Shade of the Cedar Tree”, which also featured a formidable trumpet solo by Brandon Lee, as well as tenor saxophonist and longtime collaborator Ron Blake jamming by McBride’s side. Superstar R&B singer Bilal joined the band on a number of ballads, providing a soulful top layer to the music, and showing off his legendary voice. The band closed with what McBride called “the ultimate Philly song” — Gamble and Huff’s “TSOP (The Sound of Philadelphia)”, a party anthem that was a fitting conclusion to the day’s festivities.

The joyfulness radiated by each of the acts fulfilled MJF’s purpose of honoring the American art form of jazz and demonstrating how its history and future are reflective of America itself. “We thought we would take a journey through these seminal cities where jazz helped shape those cities,” said Walker. “Jazz has something to teach us about our democracy, about what we’re striving for as individuals to live as free people that [have] a collective understanding of shared responsibility.”

For more info visit montclairjazzfestival.org



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