

# ALL THAT JAZZ

BY JO MORELLO

For 41 years, Sarasota has been a mecca for jazz musicians and fans. What does the future hold?

**THEY'VE PLAYED WITH THE WORLD'S GREATEST BANDS; PROVIDED MUSIC FOR MOVIES, BROADWAY, THE WHITE HOUSE AND ROYALTY; RECORDED THOUSANDS OF ALBUMS; WON MYRIAD AWARDS; AND COMPOSED UNFORGETTABLE SONGS.** These acclaimed jazz musicians could live anywhere. Dozens chose here. Why? Because of the Jazz Club of Sarasota.

For over 40 years, Sarasota and its environs have been home to legendary musicians at the peak of their careers and not ready to pack up their instruments. We love their music even when we don't know their names. Their résumés are long, their plaudits plentiful. (The Club, by the way, was to have hosted its 41st Sarasota Jazz Festival, headlined by The Manhattan Transfer, earlier this month at Nathan Benderson Park, but unfortunately had to cancel due to ongoing pandemic concerns.)

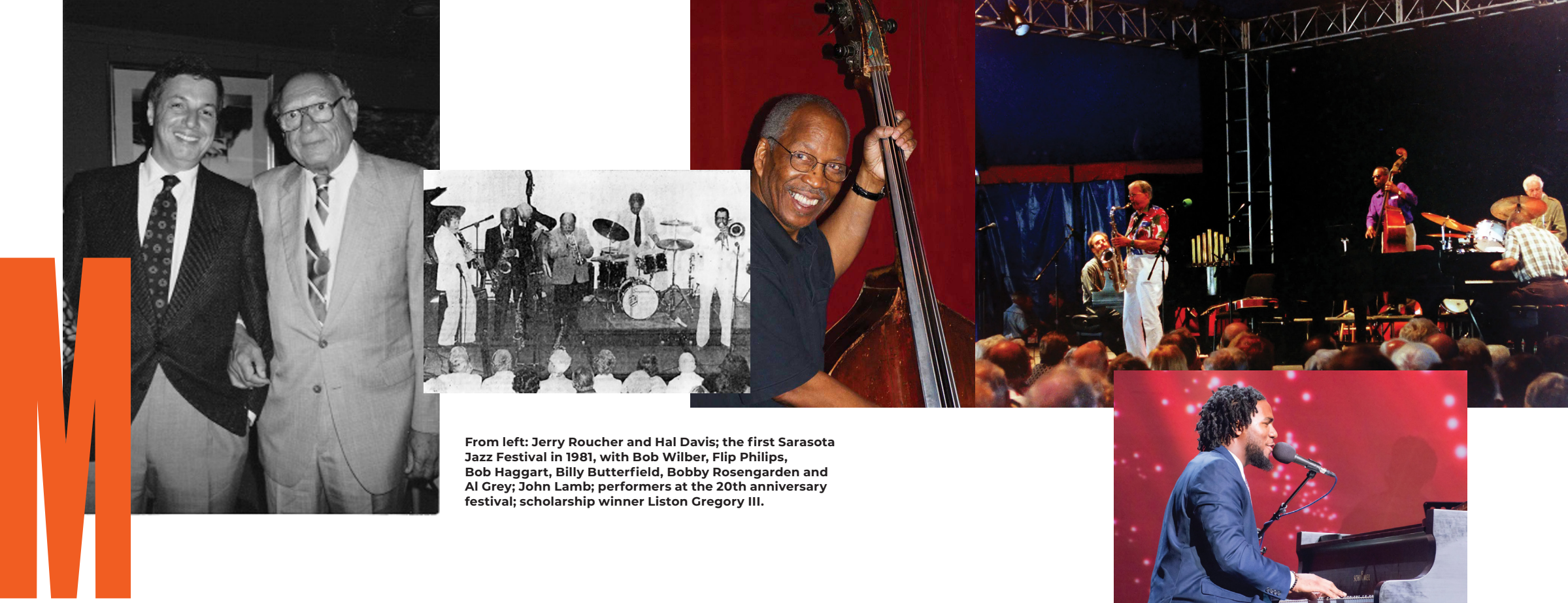
Famous musicians began moving here in the 1980s and '90s because of the Jazz Club "and its reputation for excellence and our Floridian delights," says National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master and Jazz Club honorary member for life Dick Hyman, who's based in Venice. The jazz cats found gigs with other musicians here, and if they had to travel, transportation was convenient.

When I joined the Club in 1990 as a volunteer, I met founder Hal Davis, president-elect Jerry Roucher and his wife Nancy, Hyman and his wife Julia, and many talented musicians. (Full disclosure: I held several positions with the Club until Covid hit last March.) I've gotten to know many others involved since then. ➡

"All in the Family" concert at the 20th anniversary festival, held in a circus tent, 2000. From left: Bobby Rosengarden, John and Bucky Pizzarelli, Bill Charlap, Mark Rosengarden, Neil Rosengarden, Allen Mezquida and Judy Hyman.

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From left: Jerry Roucher and Hal Davis; the first Sarasota Jazz Festival in 1981, with Bob Wilber, Flip Philips, Bob Haggart, Billy Butterfield, Bobby Rosengarden and Al Grey; John Lamb; performers at the 20th anniversary festival; scholarship winner Liston Gregory III.

Most of those early Club pioneers have died, including Jerry Roucher, who built the Club to 2,600 members during his 10-year presidency. But “musical chameleon” Hyman, 94, and bassist John Lamb, 87, remain active. Last December, for example, the Artists Concert Series of Sarasota presented Florida Jazz Masters, a sold-out concert at Marie Selby Botanical Gardens with Hyman, newer residents Randy Sandke, Peter BarenBregge and Michael Treni; longtime area musician Mark Neuenschwander; and Mark Feinman of the up-and-coming trio La Lucha.

The Jazz Club began when advertising genius and Benny Goodman publicist Hal Davis retired here from New York in 1979. He and his wife Evelyn invited friends over to their place to listen to their records. By 1980 they’d booked Hal’s friends for their first concert: guitarists Bucky Pizzarelli and Bucky’s 20-year-old son John, on his way to international stardom. John recalls arriving at the Sarasota airport, which, he says, “was a few trailer homes linked together.” He realized early on that Hal would “stretch the envelope to bring new and upcoming jazz musicians and music.”

The volunteer-run Club produced its first Sarasota Jazz Festival in 1981. Lucille Armstrong attended the second, dedicated to her late husband Louis. The bar was set high, and jazz stars from across the country responded, along with more than 1,000 members in the first few years.

Bob Seymour, recently retired after 35 years as WUSF 89.7’s jazz director, lived here then, working for Sarasota radio stations. He’d attended early Club meetings, but, at 30, he’d found only one other young person. Now an honorary life member, he credits area audiences in large measure for the Club’s phenomenal growth. “Even Hal wouldn’t have had such success if he’d lived in, say, Lakeland,” he says.

The Rouchers relocated here in 1986 from Decatur (where Jerry had founded the Central Illinois Jazz Festival) and promptly joined the Jazz Club of Sarasota. Bassist John Lamb

was already here (since 1969) after playing the world’s finest venues with the Duke Ellington Orchestra and in a trio with Ellington and Louis Bellson. Lamb taught for decades in St. Petersburg schools, including then-St. Petersburg Junior College, and continues to share his talents with us.

The Hymans, occasional visitors, were here in 1981 when Dick played for the first festival. They had met the Rouchers in jazz circles and stayed with them in 1989 while their Venice home was readied for their relocation. “Dick would sit at our

piano every morning, put that day’s *New York Times* on the music rack, and practice the scales,” Nancy recalls. Jerry asked a painter working there if he liked the music. “Well, it’s nice,” he said, “but couldn’t he play a different newspaper?”

**During Roucher’s 10-year presidency, the Club often filled the auditorium of the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall with enthusiastic audiences.**

The 70-year career of Hyman, a pianist, organist, arranger, music director and composer, has resulted in film scores (*Moonstruck*, 11 Woody Allen films); compositions for orchestras and ballets; concerts, radio and TV shows; and over 100 albums under his name. He has played at the White House and received two Emmy awards, seven National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences awards and two honorary doctorates.

By 1990, the Jazz Club was a powerhouse, with president-elect Jerry Roucher poised to replace the retiring Davis. That happened sooner than expected, when Davis died suddenly.

During Roucher’s 10-year presidency, the Club increased the number of its events to nearly 100 each year and expanded the festival to a week, often filling the auditorium of the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall with enthusiastic audiences. But, over the years, membership gradually fell,

only partly because older members died, and leadership sought a path toward a broader, younger audience. Some wanted to redefine the Club’s identity, and personalities clashed as they tangled over the style of jazz to present.

When Roucher produced the 2005 festival with smooth jazz star Kenny G, for example, it created dismay in some, delight in others. Former president Dave Walrath says that many forgot: “It’s all about the music!”

Seymour, now president of the Tampa Jazz Club, says, “After such a strong start under Hal and then Jerry, you’re always going to have ups and downs. But it’s still a remarkable success story over 40 years.” Fortunately, memberships are again rising.

And youth outreach, to keep the jazz coming for future generations, continues as an important part of the Club’s mission, including the scholarship program begun around 1983. It has awarded 79 scholarships just since 2013, and eight to 10 annually in preceding years. (Sadly, only 2 percent of the applicants have been female.)

Many of these scholarship winners are successful. Take pianist Liston Gregory III, 25, who has toured with a two-time Grammy-winning jazz drummer, performed at the Apollo Theatre and John F. Kennedy Center, owns Liston G3 Productions, and is now becoming a worship and arts pastor. “The scholarship had a huge impact on my future,” he says. “The Jazz Club gave me a platform to nurture my talent.”

Steve Frumkin, owner of the international JWP Agency, has booked his artists here for years because, he says, “The Sarasota Jazz Festival is among the top 25 in North America. They bring significant artists, in significant numbers.” And

## WHERE TO FIND JAZZ

Many jazz venues are getting back into the swing, and some musicians profiled here are excited to play for you again. Here’s what we know at this writing, but call first to be sure.

### Facebook Groups

Jazz Club of Sarasota

Where will we go tonight?

Suncoast Jazz Happenings

Jazz in Sarasota

Jazz in Tampa Bay

### Radio/Audio

**WSLR 96.5** Visit [wslr.org/](http://wslr.org/) music for this organization’s schedule of programs and times.

**WUSF 89.7 FM**, this area’s NPR station, presents “All Night Jazz” from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. daily.

**Metropics Radio** is an online medium with a 24/7 program schedule that “helps promote and share America’s original art form, jazz, with the rest of the globe.” Visit [metropics-radio.org](http://metropics-radio.org).

### Live Venues

Reedman Peter BarenBregge plays with the Sarasota Jazz Project, a big band, every Friday from 6 to 8 p.m. at **Cafe BarBosso**, 5501 Palmer Crossing Circle A, Sarasota, (941) 922-7999.

WSLR/Fogartyville has teamed with the Jazz Club of Sarasota for the monthly Bridge Series—jazz live-streamed and live (to a limited audience) through May 27. They also present a lively program of jazz and other events. Visit **Fogartyville Community Media and Arts Center**, 525 Kumquat Court, Sarasota, (941) 894-6469. [wslr.org](http://wslr.org).

If you’re up for a drive to Cape Coral, catch trumpeter Randy Sandke, who plays with trombonist Herb Bruce and pianist Bob Page at the restaurant and jazz club **Slate’s** on Saturdays, 6-9 p.m., and Sundays, 10:30 a.m.-2 p.m., at 4820 Candia St., Cape Coral, (239) 540-6800.

### Eblasts/Newsletters

**Jazzbluesflorida.com** offers personal subscriptions of regional events through its newsletter, “Jazz & Blues Florida - Florida’s Online Guide to the Best in Live Jazz & Blues.” Sign up on the website.

**BandsinTown.com:** Register on this website for weekly notifications of live shows and tours in the area, along with streamed performances.

**World.jazznearyou.com/welcome.php** provides loads of jazz news and subscriptions to “All About Jazz,” a weekly eblast geared to specific regions.

### Websites

The Jazz Club of Sarasota, **jazzclubsarasota.org**, is a good place to find events. The website lists Jazz Club activities and you can also subscribe to the club’s Jazz Around Town, a weekly eblast that lists events throughout the community, with many listings provided by the musicians themselves. Request your free subscription at [admin@jazzclubsarasota.com](mailto:admin@jazzclubsarasota.com).

**GoTonight:** a good online calendar for all music events, not just jazz. [gotonight.com](http://gotonight.com).

Check out the websites and Facebook pages of individual musicians, bands, combos and restaurants for up-to-date information—and don’t overlook farmers’ markets, art fairs and other outdoor events. And although guitarist Diego Figueiredo is unable to re-enter the U.S. from Brazil until Covid subsides, jazz lovers can enjoy his free, live-streamed and recorded performances on YouTube and Facebook.





From far left: Ken Peplowski and Diego Figueiredo; Peter BarenBregge; Dick Hyman; The Old Souls; Bill Charlap, Houston Person, Randy Sandke and Russell Malone.

Rachel Domber, co-founder and president of Arbors Records, the originator and producer of Clearwater's March of Jazz Party for 17 years and a longtime sponsor of the Sarasota Jazz Festival and the Suncoast Jazz Festival, chimes in, "The Sarasota Club puts on a top-notch festival each year."

Performers over the years have included such luminaries as Dave Brubeck, Rosemary Clooney, Lionel Hampton, Pete Fountain, Chick Corea and the Marsalis family. Among frequent returnees: the late pianist Marian McPartland and bassist Milt Hinton, along with saxophonist Houston Person

and Ken Peplowski, fourth-year festival director and "arguably the greatest living jazz clarinetist," according to BBC2.

All these musicians made memories. Drummer Bobby Rosengarden and Dixieland legend Bob Haggart thrilled audiences at the Van Wezel and smaller venues with Haggart's "Big Noise from Winnetka" with Bob playing bass—and straight man—while Bobby scampered around the room, whistling the tune through his teeth, tapping his drumsticks on chairs and Bob's strings, and never missing a beat. Other highlights include the Benny Goodman tribute,

when a lift dramatically raised musicians from the pit to the stage (1984); Dick Hyman playing calliope in a tent for a circus-themed festival while the Van Wezel was being renovated (2000); saxophonist Kenny G wailing his way through the audience (2005); the "Old Souls" concert featuring scholarship winners (2016); and 2019, when Houston Person played his mellow sax. And played. And played. Finally, festival director Peplowski popped onstage to say, "Houston, when you're done, turn out the lights."

Some jazz musicians here are more recent arrivals. Most say they had regular gigs pre-Covid and hope they'll resume. (See the sidebar on local jazz venues.)

Pianist, composer and teacher Tommy Goodman, a young 96, moved to Manatee County in 2010 after a successful musical career in New York. Among his credits: arranging and conducting the famous Louis Armstrong recording of "What a Wonderful World" with a 32-piece orchestra. "Louis was a pussycat to work with," he recalls. Brazilian guitarist Diego Figueiredo, 40, whom George Benson called "one of the greatest guitarists I've seen in my whole life," has lived here half of each year for some time and hopes to relocate permanently. Grammy-nominated in 2020 and rave-reviewed in February's *Downbeat*, the global performer won the Montreux Guitar Competition twice.

Banjoist and guitarist Ken Salvo moved to Venice in 2017 after 12 years with Vince Giordano's Nighthawks in New York. He is known for performances at the Newport Jazz Festival and Lincoln Center and for recordings for the HBO drama *Boardwalk Empire*. The Nighthawks also performed live at several venues for a Turner Classic Movies film festival in Hollywood.

Reedman Peter BarenBregge moved to Venice in 2017 after 35 years in Washington, D.C., primarily as music director of the Air Force band Airmen of Note, performing for presidential inaugurations, traveling internationally and playing for royalty. "We had the best musicians I could dream of, and

incredible guest artists like Dizzy Gillespie," he says. A longtime instrumental jazz editor for Alfred Publishing, he also teaches online.

Trumpet and cornet player, composer and arranger Randy Sandke moved to Venice in 2018. "Dick [Hyman] had a lot to do with it," he says. Sandke conducted and arranged music for the Carnegie Hall Jazz Band, toured extensively and played for films, Broadway and more.

Trombonist, educator and composer Michael Treni's "odd career" includes teaching at the University of Miami School of Music and the Berklee School of Music. He also played for Broadway musicals, wrote for jingles and recordings, and led his own big band. Inspired by Kathy, his deaf wife and deaf education specialist, he also founded a company manufacturing wireless audio devices. He moved to Venice in 2018.

Educator and consultant Ed Linehan relocated to Sarasota in 2014 to be near his parents and in a jazz-conscious community where his wife, Synia Carroll, could rejuvenate her singing career. He met musicians through her, became Jazz Club president in 2018, and reluctantly, oversaw the cancellation of the 40th anniversary festival in March 2020 (and the subsequent cancellation in 2021). The Club was dark until a February 2021 partnership with WSLR and the Fogartyville Community Media and Arts Center brought us the Bridge Music Series with live and livestreamed jazz.

Will jazz survive these challenging times and changes in the music industry? "People said jazz was dying 50 years ago. It's evolving," says Bob Seymour. Domber cites a new festival trend: swing dancing. "It's a big deal for fans and draws a younger crowd," she says. "I recorded a band specializing in this. It's big all over Europe, too." Jazz, Seymour says, "is not going to die."

We await the downbeat. No matter what, we're set to swing.

*Jo Morello is the author of the play Lil & Satchmo, focusing on Louis Armstrong's second wife, pianist Lil Hardin.*

## The Late Great Jazz Men (And One Woman)

They're gone now, but you know their music. Look 'em up!

Saxophonist, clarinetist, composer and arranger **Jerry Jerome**, a 1970s resident, played with Glenn Miller, Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman and Red Norvo. He directed the first eight Sarasota Jazz Festivals.

Drummer **Bobby Rosengarden** played in TV show bands for Steve Allen, Ernie Kovacs, Mitch Miller and Johnny Carson before becoming bandleader for *The Dick Cavett Show*.

Bassist **Bob Haggart** arrived after a career as a performer, arranger and composer of jazz standards including "South Rampart Street Parade" (co-composer) and the classic "What's New?." He played with the Bob Crosby Band and recorded with Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie

Holiday, Duke Ellington and Benny Goodman.

Clarinetist, composer and arranger **Walt Levinsky** arrived after playing with Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey. He also headed his own band, wrote TV show themes and played in more than 5,000 recording sessions.

**Lillette Jenkins-Wisner**, who moved here in the early '90s, had played Carnegie Hall at 11—a rarity for a Black girl. The "Queen of the Keys" (per Duke Ellington) performed in and music-directed off-Broadway shows, including *One Mo' Time*; opened for Sammy

Davis Jr. and Frank Sinatra; and with her first husband, operated Lillette's Rhythm Club in Nevada—the first African-Americans to do so.

Clarinetist, saxophonist, composer and educator **John LaPorta** "retired" here in the '90s after years working in New York. He performed with Woody Herman, Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Dizzy Gillespie, Buddy Rich and Miles Davis, as well as Leonard Bernstein, Igor Stravinsky and the Boston Pops.

Saxophonist **Kenny Soderbom** toured with Gerry Mulligan and Louis Bellson, played at Carnegie Hall, backed Benny Goodman and Frank Sinatra, and played with the Chicago Symphony and *Jerry Lewis Telethon* with Rosengarden. He directed the Jazz Club's Jazz on the Bayfront for years, as well as several festivals.



PHOTOS BY CAROL LORICCO