

## Sarasota Jazz Festival



Houston Person, left,  
and Terell Stafford.

### Stars Mix and Match as 'Live' Music Returns

*"It's Very Special to Perform with Tag Team Pianists.  
That's When You Know You've Arrived."*

BY SANFORD JOSEPHSON



Since I Fell for You" was composed by bandleader Buddy Johnson in 1945. It became a hit for his vocalist (and sister) Ella Johnson and has been recorded by Dinah Washington, Bonnie Raitt, and Al Jarreau, among others.

It had a spirited revitalization on March 16 at the Sarasota Jazz Festival. During Houston Person's main stage concert, pianist John O'Leary began fingering the intro and then Person and trumpeter Terell Stafford joined in for a blues-infused performance that ignited the audience as well as the musicians. Backed by bassist Alejandro Arenas, drummer Mark Feinman, and O'Leary, alternating with Shelly Berg on piano, Person had led the crowd through a selection of jazz and pop standards such as Rube Bloom's "Maybe You'll Be There", Benny Carter's "Only Trust Your Heart", and Matt Dennis'

"The Night They Called It a Day".

Then, Stafford, scheduled to be a headliner the next night, joined Person for George Gershwin's "Fascinatin' Rhythm" and Bobby Hebb's "Sunny", sandwiched around "Since I Fell For You." Person and Stafford previously played together on Person's 2010 HighNote album, *Moment to Moment*, and Ken Dryden, reviewing it for *AllMusic*, wrote that, "Trumpeter Terell Stafford proves to be an excellent foil for the veteran, especially in the driving setting of Person's hard bop vehicle, 'Bleeker Street', while his Louis Armstrong-accented playing in the laid-back blues, 'Back in New Orleans' nearly steals the show."

Based on their brief Sarasota performance together, a pairing of Person and Stafford on a regular basis would be good news for everyone. O'Leary, Arenas, and Feinman are members of the Tampa Bay-based trio, La Lucha, and they served as the festival's

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house rhythm section. They got to rest after Person's set, which was followed by John Pizzarelli and Catherine Russell's "Billie & Blue Eyes" performance of songs associated with Billie Holiday and Frank Sinatra. They were accompanied by their own rhythm section of bassist Mike Karn and pianist Isaiah J. Thompson.

Pizzarelli recalled coming to the first Sarasota Jazz Festival, as a 19-year-old, with his father Bucky in 1980. "My father brought his classical guitar and his Benedetto guitar," Pizzarelli said, "and the classical guitar got damaged on the airplane. Fortunately, Bob Benedetto fixed it. I'm pleased to be back 42 years later."

There were plenty of Sinatra stories, including one about how Cy Coleman brought a pile of songs for Sinatra's consideration. After shuffling through the pile, Sinatra asked him to play the one on top, which turned out to be "Witchcraft". With

lyrics by Carolyn Leigh, it was released as a Capitol Records single by Sinatra in 1957, reached Number 6 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 charts, and reappeared in 1963 on the Reprise album, *Sinatra's Sinatra*.

Pizzarelli soloed on guitar and vocal for the Jule Styne and Susan Birkenhead song, "It's Sunday", which Sinatra recorded with guitarist Tony Mottola on the B side of a 45 rpm single in 1983. According to the *UK Independent*, Sinatra had rejected the original orchestral arrangement by Don Costa, saying, "You're missing the whole point. I want this to be a very intimate thing. Let me do it with Tony to show you."

Russell and Pizzarelli alternated on a number of songs from the Sinatra/Holiday songbook including Burton Lane and Harold Adamson's "Everything I Have Is Yours" (Russell), Jimmy Van Heusen and Johnny Burke's "Polka Dots and Moon-



**John Pizzarelli and Catherine Russell.**

beams" (Pizzarelli), and Van Heusen and Eddie DeLange's "Darn That Dream" (Russell). The showstopper, though, was Harry M. Woods' "What A Little Moonlight Can Do", sung by Russell to the accompaniment of Pizzarelli's rapid guitar strumming.

As for the young, talented pianist, Thompson (a *Jersey Jazz* Rising Star, November/December 2020), Pizzarelli predicted that, sometime in the future, "We'll be knocking on the stage door, hoping he'll say hello, saying, 'Remember when we did that show in Sarasota?'"

The next night, Stafford wel-

comed his own guest, guitarist Russell Malone, slated to perform as a headliner on March 18. They collaborated on Hoagy Carmichael's "Skylark" and Mercer Ellington's "Things Ain't What They Used To Be". Stafford recalled that Malone performed with him on his 1997 Candid release, *Centripetal Force*. In her review of that album for *AllMusic*, Judith Schlesinger singled out Malone's "memorable solo on the relaxed and swinging 'Skylark.'" She also pointed out that, in physics, centripetal force "describes how separate energies gravitate toward the center. Here, the center

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is more than Stafford's beautiful horn—there's a warm calm at the core of this music, regardless of tempo."

Stafford told the audience how glad he was "to make music in person again in my home state (He was born in Miami)." He also acknowledged the uniqueness of the rotating pianists. "It's very special to perform with tag team pianists," he said. "That's when you know you've arrived." His musical choices paid tribute to some jazz trumpet giants—"Mr. Kenyatta" by Lee Morgan and Harry Warren's "September in the Rain", forever associated with the late Roy Hargrove. Other selections included Frank Loesser's "I've Never Been In Love Before"; Roberta Martin's spiritual, "He Knows How Much You Can Bear", closely associated with Mahalia Jackson; and Alex Kramer's "Candy".

Earlier in the day, Stafford, who is Director of Jazz and Instrumental Studies at Temple University's



Dick Hyman, left, and Ken Peplowski.

Boyer College of Music and Dance, conducted a clinic for music students at the State College of Florida.

At the 2017 Sarasota Jazz Festival, clarinetist/tenor saxophonist Ken Peplowski and pianist Dick Hyman performed together at Sarasota's Michaels On East restaurant to celebrate Hyman's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. At that time, Peplowski called Hyman "the most important person in my life as a person and a mentor." In 2019, Hyman and Peplowski recorded several Alan Jay Lerner & Frederick Loewe tunes on the Arbors album, *Counter-*

*point Lerner & Loewe*. In his *Jersey Jazz* review, Joe Lang wrote that Hyman and Peplowski's "approach to contrapuntal playing has been honed over years of playing together, and they anticipate each other's twists and turns as if they had one brain."

In Sarasota, the ageless Hyman asked Peplowski, "How long have we been doing this?" Peplowski responded, "since the early '80s." Then, he told the audience Hyman "did a fiendish thing to me at the Piano Spectacular at Waterloo Village (in the early '80s). Someone was late, and

Dick said, 'Ken, I need you to play for 15 minutes.' I said, 'Who am I playing with?' And, he said, 'No one.'"

Their repertoire in Sarasota included Juan Tizol's "Caravan", Ray Henderson's "It All Depends On You", Johnny Green's "Body and Soul", and Jerome Kern's "All The Things You Are". Echoing Stafford, Peplowski reiterated that, "It's so nice to be experiencing live music again."

I was not present for the next two nights, but the March 18 concert presented Russell Malone and Friends and vocalist Tierney Sutton, accompanied by Shelly Berg on piano. Berg, by the way, is the most energetic, exuberant pianist I have ever observed. His liveliness, in fact, prompted my wife, Linda, to comment, "Shelly Berg is just having *too* much fun." Berg and Peplowski were Co-Musical Directors of the festival, which concluded on March 19 with La Lucha playing their own set, followed by trumpeter Arturo Sandoval.