

On the Beat

Thomas Staudter

Free Jazz: A Tribute to Carmen Leggio

For the past eleven years, Mark Morganelli's Jazz Forum Arts has been presenting free jazz concerts around Westchester with funding cobbled together from grants and support from corporate partners, various arts councils and other donors. Somehow, the dire economic times in the music biz have not kept Saint Mark, as he is known to many of the area's jazz aficionados, from scheduling more than 30 shows at five different venues this summer. All of this is in addition to running the Jazz Forum night club from Friday through Sunday with wife and partner Ellen Prior, plus performing his own gigs on Wednesday nights in the Equus Restaurant up at the Castle Hotel & Spa in Tarrytown and on alternating Tuesdays at The Westchester, a big mall in White Plains that I only visit under duress.

Anyway, remember to thank the enthusiastic, curly-haired trumpet and flugelhorn player if you see him sitting in at one of the upcoming concerts or at his own gigs for this amazing public and cultural service he pulls off each year.

Back to the free outdoor jazz: The vibe at these shows is utterly relaxing. People show up with their lawn chairs and blankets, picnic baskets filled with dinner items and something to read and while away the time before the music hits. Many attendees are commuters to Gotham who simply walk off the train right over to the concerts.

The music takes place at riverside spaces—Waterfront Park in Dobbs Ferry, Lyndhurst in Tarrytown, Pierson Park in Tarrytown, Horan's Landing Park in Sleepy Hollow and Henry Gourdin Park in Ossining—just as the sun begins to drop and move toward the Palisades. Maybe a little breeze picks up, and the workaday starts to drift away. I think I just heard someone uncork a bottle.

And, as most jazz fans will tell you, seeing the tuneful notables scheduled to perform for free here in Westchester this

summer is far better than twitting out an easy \$75 a head (not including parking) to see them at, say, the Blue Note in Manhattan.

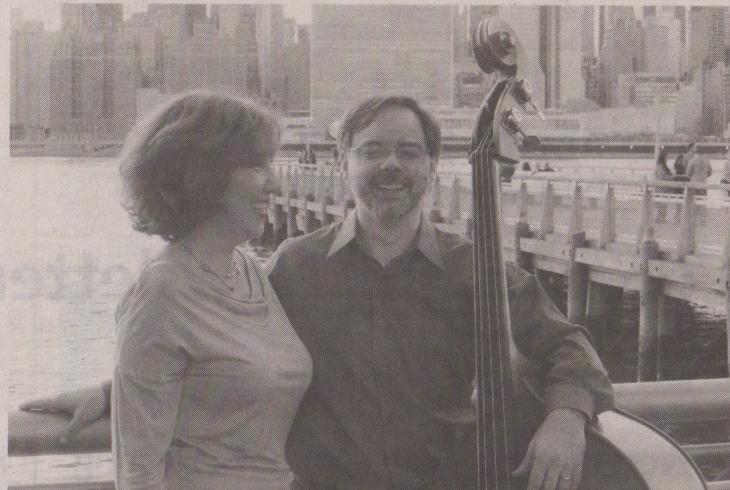
Though I won't be able to see even half the shows on the schedule (and a few, including the series opener in Dobbs Ferry with harmonica virtuoso Hendrik Meurkens, have already passed), there are several that I'm putting down on my calendar as must-go events.

First up is one of the Friday night shows at Pierson Park, this one on July 13, which will be a tribute to saxophonist Carmen Leggio, known far and wide as the "Tarrytown Tenor," featuring bassist Mark Wade with trio mates Tim Harrison on piano and Scott Neumann on drums, plus dynamic tenor saxman Ralph Lalama, long a stalwart of the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra and the gone-but-not-forgotten Westchester Jazz Orchestra.

Accomplished jazz vocalist Teri Wade, Leggio's daughter, will be on hand as well, joining her husband on stage and embellishing the proceedings with a degree of poignancy: growing up in Tarrytown, she'd often visit the river with her father.

Leggio was born in Tarrytown of Sicilian immigrants who loved music. His father played guitar and mandolin in "the kind of bands that used to set up under people's windows," the saxophonist once told me. After hearing Artie Shaw on the radio, Leggio, who was then 9, took up the clarinet. Thanks to his precocious math skills, he surmised, advancement on the instrument without lessons came quickly. He never learned to read music.

When Leggio was 14 his parents bought him a tenor saxophone, and he formed a combo with two school friends, Holmes (Junebug) Lindsay on drums and Primo Rico on bass. Their first gig was at a nightspot called Club Six on Cortland Street in Tarrytown; Leggio had been born in one of the upstairs apartments. The next year he quit high school, much to his



Teri and Mark Wade

parents' dismay, to become a professional musician.

Of all the musicians born and raised in Westchester who established themselves in the jazz firmament, including Sal Mosca, Joe Puma, Eddie Bert and Sonny Sharrock, I'd say Leggio's achievements sparkle the brightest. In his heyday during the 1950s he played regularly in bands led by Goodman, Woody Herman and Maynard Ferguson, and even fronted his own quartet.

I asked him once what his greatest moment in jazz was.

"Playing at Metropole in Manhattan back in 1954," he said without hesitation. "It was the last stop for all the swing cats. I was there with Gene Krupa's quartet. For about three years we were busy, and so many great musicians worked there—it was like a who's who. Afterwards, we'd go across the street to the Copper Rail, which had a great soul food menu, at about 7 a.m."

The years of late nights and long hours, however, took their toll on Leggio. Even though he spent much of the 1960s being featured on variety shows, schmoozing on camera after he had played for Johnny Carson, Dean Martin and Mike Douglas, he was married three times, and suffered lean times during the 1970s, even living in his car for a while. (A business card he used to hand out had printed on it just his license plate number.) To some extent, the whole story of how he prevailed and survived was heard through his instrument.

Leggio enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in his late 70s and never stopped thinking about playing and setting up more work. He had regular gigs at the Red Hat in Irvington and Division Street Grill in Peekskill, often sharing the bandstand with guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli, another swing-era legend. In 2009, he died of a massive heart attack in Tarrytown while on his way to have lunch with friends. His simple motto, he told me, was this: "To swing is to be happy, and to be happy is to swing."

Teri and Mark Wade are determined to keep Leggio's legacy alive. Married in 2008, the couple met several years earlier when Teri was taking music theory and ear training lessons at The Singer's Forum in Manhattan, and one of the instructors was her future husband.

"I was very fortunate to come from such a strong musical background,"

said Teri during a call earlier this week. "My mother was a professional concert pianist, and an uncle, one of my dad's brothers who lived in New Rochelle, was a singer. I remember listening to different recordings with my father on a big reel-to-reel player he had. I was always interested in music and had a good voice; by 18 I was taking lessons, and in my early 20s was getting gigs around town. But I also had gone to college and then had different marketing and communications jobs in the healthcare field. In the early 2000s, I decided to start singing again, and in the past few years have really worked at it. The best part of it all is I get to sing a lot of the songs that I remember my dad that played."

Mark Wade landed on my radar a few years ago when he released a recording with his trio, *Event Horizon*, which mixed originals and standards with solos galore in arrangements full of devilish interplay. A few months ago, a follow-up came out called *Moving Day* that is even better: Wade's bass lines are big and chewy, full of invention, and he shares the spotlight with Harrison and Neumann so well that you'd have trouble ascertaining who the leader of the project is.

A Midwesterner who ended up in New Jersey, Wade came to New York for college and was soon gigging regularly at Birdland. Among the saxophonists he studied with was Lalama, who introduced him to Leggio's music long before he'd met Teri. Wade's long list of bandstand associations include work with Stacey Kent, Jimmy Heath and Don Byron, plus a longstanding spot in Bill Warfield's New York Jazz Repertory Orchestra. He teaches at Lehigh University and helps run a non-profit jazz presenting organization called New Music Horizons. Additionally, Wade performs with several classical music ensembles, including the Bronx Opera and Janacek Philharmonic of the Czech Republic.

I forgot to ask Wade whether he ever had a chance to jam with his father-in-law.

A Tribute to Carmen Leggio featuring the Mark Wade Trio plus special guests Teri Wade and Ralph Lalama will take place on Friday, July 16 at Pierson Park, Tarrytown. Free admission. The music begins at 6:30 p.m. For a full schedule of the above-mentioned free concerts, call 631-1000 or visit www.jazzforumarts.org.

Autistic students' artwork featured at BeanRunner exhibit

Explosive abstracts, delicate portraits and Marvel-worthy comic illustrations were among the artworks recently exhibited at the BeanRunner Café in Peekskill—all part of an exhibit by artists on the autism spectrum.

The show, which was the brainchild of Peekskill artist Wilfredo Morel and artist Donna Mikkelsen, was on display in April and May.

It featured works by six students of the Walden School at Putnam-Northern Westchester BOCES, one former BOCES

created by stretching rubber bands around a lunch tray, painting the bands and then snapping them against a piece of paper inserted on the tray.

Christian Irizarry, whose pencil drawings resemble comic book characters, uses whatever is available, creating some of his works on the backs of desk calendar pages or school worksheets. Christian's drawings of characters before and after a great, comic superhero battle are incredibly detailed and engaging, commends Mr. Steiner.

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