

A conversation about jazz and Jazz Night at Saltus with local music maven Vic Varner

By Margaret Evans, Editor

Q. Tell me about the genesis of Jazz Night at Saltus? How did it come to be?

A. Jazz exists mostly in big cities and at major universities, but having lived in Beaufort for a decade now, I've become acquainted with our arts culture, and would like to think we have enough appreciators to support a weekly jazz night. Lantz Price, the proprietor of Saltus River Grill, and I have had this in the works for some time. Saltus is a classy joint with a reputation for some awesome cuisine, so jazz is a good fit.

Q. Tell me a little bit about your ensemble.

A. The basic "Bossa" quartet is Bill Aycock on piano, George Sheck on bass, David Lugo on percussion, and myself on vocals and guitar. Bill lives in Charleston and folks there would tell you he's the best. A graduate of the prestigious Berkeley School of Music in Boston, he's a great pianist and composer. George Sheck currently resides in Okatie. He is the real road warrior in the band... used to be Peggy Lee's bassist and also toured for years with bluesman Edgar Winter. David Lugo comes in from Savannah and supplies us with a nice steady groove. From time to time we mix it up with other musicians and styles.

Q. Speaking of styles . . . you perform lots of different music around here. You direct the choirs at USCB and First Presbyterian Church, and you retired a few years ago from directing the amazing and awarding-winning BHS Voices. You also play gigs all over town everything from pop to rock to folk and country. Why Jazz Night? What's so special about jazz?

A. Jazz is my favorite style. I'm really just a student of it . . . the more I learn, the more I find out I don't know. The form is so special to me because I like songs with interesting chord changes and challenging melodic ideas. Our Bossa Nova style has all of the above, plus a really pleasant groove. It's happy music.

Q. Have you always been a jazz lover, or did you grow into it?

A. I got into jazz from listening to my father's records. He loved jazz singers like Billy Eckstein and Nat Cole. My parents saw Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald on their honeymoon in New York. Later on, my Aunt Snooky turned me on to Bossa Nova. Snook is one of the hippest ladies ever.

Q. Some people think jazz is hard to "get" . . . a little too cerebral . . . an acquired taste. How would you convert those naysayers?

A. Jazz is an acquired taste. There might be a little learning curve up front, but the reward is big. I've found in my musical life that the things I struggle to understand are the things that I enjoy long term. If I like something immediately, it's often discarded quickly. I'm a jazz appreciator because I love to hear players improvise. Most people can enjoy the virtuosity of a great instrumentalist "making that thing talk." It's a great joy to be present when a musician blows an audience away like that. I recommend a few things to develop that taste: buy jazz records; take my course in Jazz History at USCB (smile); and attend shows. We're lucky to have The Jazz Corner on Hilton Head great live jazz seven nights a week. More Beaufortonians need to discover this little gem. JC is on Downbeat Magazine's list of "Top 100 Jazz Destinations in the World." We had the honor of playing there last summer, and look forward to another gig there in 2014. Owner Bob Mastellar has something really special going on. We are opening for his band at a concert on March 7 at USCB's Center for the Arts.

Q. Who are some of your favorite jazz performers of yesterday and today?

A. There are so many. I love

Jazzy Sundays

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to hear Johnny Hodges play alto sax . . . He was in Duke Ellington's Band. Kurt Elling is what's happening in male vocal jazz. If you want to hear somebody tear up an upright bass, check out Esperanza Spalding. It was so funny when she beat out Justin Bieber for "Best New Artist" at the Grammy's a couple of years ago. Her name was called and, of course, nobody but jazz fans knew who she was. Beib was so mad. But above all my favorite artist is Brazilian composer Antonio Carlos Jobim. If you really want to experience his genius, buy "Eliane Elias Sings Jobim."

Q. You happen to be my choir director at church. How is leading a jazz band different from directing a church choir?

A. Church choirs sing for God and to set moods for worship. Jazz bands play the songs of Satan. (Haha, just kidding, although I once had a preacher tell me I was playing "the Devil's instrument" . . . happened in the 70s). Church choirs are usually made up of volunteers. Jazz musicians like some cash, although usually it's not much. I like this quote: "A jazz musician is someone who puts a \$5000 instrument into a \$500 car, then drives 50 miles for a \$5 gig." That about sums it up.

Jazz Night at Saltus is every Sunday from 6 ♦ 9 pm. Saltus River Grill is located at 802 Bay Street. www.saltusrivergrill.com