

# San Jose Jazz Festival: Where is the jazz?

## SAN JOSE FESTIVAL STRAYS TOO FAR FROM ITS ROOTS

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We live in a time when what seems to be, often isn't. An all-beef hot dog is filled with water and sugar and assorted binding agents, and may even come in a pork casing.

Why are you reading this in the Sunday arts section? Because I'm wondering when a jazz festival by name is no longer a jazz festival in reality.

The question arises because San Jose Jazz has announced the headliners of this summer's 18th Annual Comcast San Jose Jazz Festival Presented by Southwest Airlines. The festival, spanning Aug. 8-12, with most acts performing over the last three days, has many ingredients, though the jazz part seems to be getting lost among the musical equivalents of water, sugar and those binding agents.

This time around, the festival's Main Stage, in the Plaza de Cesar Chavez in downtown San Jose, will feature rhythm and blues, smooth jazz and cranked-up fusion jazz out of L.A.'s commercial studio scene as well as a couple of good-looking all-star groups, one straight-ahead jazz, the other Latin jazz. It's a mixed bag, and I'm not sure what message San Jose Jazz is sending.

What's the big deal?

Well, a lot of people, including this writer, actually think jazz is the most significant musical form to emerge anywhere in the world in the past century. It is entertaining, mind-expanding and soul-enriching. It is expansive, an ocean of music, miles deep. And like any great music, it can offer you a great time while momentarily transporting you and maybe even changing your life.

It also is being pushed to the cultural margins in this era of global corporate media, when "American Idol" and "Dancing With the Stars" seem to have the whole world hypnotized. And yet, in recent years, San Jose Jazz has done something remarkable: It has presented a practically free festival (it now costs \$5 for the whole weekend) attended by tens of thousands who have practically worshiped at the altar of jazz.

But last year, something tipped toward pop. Geoff Roach, the new executive director of San Jose Jazz, booked the Neville Brothers and Dr. John on the Main Stage. I'm a fan of both. Still, why were they centerpieces of what had been a successful jazz festival?

Roach, a New Orleans native, explained that he wanted to present a post-Katrina celebration of New Orleans music. He argued that jazz and New Orleans rhythm and blues are first cousins anyway, and that *if* the festival had in any way slipped away from its pure jazz mission (he didn't quite cop to the slippage), it was because of the happenstance of economics and artist availability.

I spoke to Roach this week and again he pledged allegiance to jazz roots while citing economics and artist availability as influencing the lineup. The festival (which kicks off Aug. 8 with a fundraising gala) has an operating budget of about \$1 million; admissions, concessions and corporate sponsorships are major funding sources. I don't doubt that, with each year, those dollars are stretched thinner.

Still, choices are being made - which Roach admitted. The Main Stage is for "acts that are more widely accepted by the public," he said. "It's basically giving the audience what they want."

Did they previously *not* want jazz? In recent years, I've never noticed anything but large crowds pressing up to the Main Stage and expressing pure pleasure while listening to Jimmy Heath, James Moody, Terence Blanchard, Eddie Palmieri, Ray Barretto, Steve Turre, Geri Allen and many others, including Dr. Lonnie Smith, who, to Roach's credit, appeared last year.

Now, let's look at the 2007 festival's Main Stage headliners for Saturday, Aug. 11, the first full day of music. Three of four have been announced. Leading off is the Airmen of Note, the big band of the U.S. Air Force. Hmmm. Let's reserve judgment, but Basie, or his second coming, this is not.

Second is saxophonist Gerald Albright, the smooth jazz star whose treacly murmurings bear as much relationship to actual jazz as John Williams soundtracks do to Mahler symphonies. Albright is jazz light, and maybe not jazz at all. (Guitarist Lee Ritenour, appearing Sunday with an "all-star" band out of L.A., represents another step toward glossed-up commercial jazz.)

Third is David "Fathead" Newman, a truly great jazz and rhythm and blues saxophonist, leading a tribute to his old boss, Ray Charles. Some people will hate me for saying this but, sorry, as much as I love the music of Brother Ray, all these tributes are getting a little long in the tooth.

I have to wonder why San Jose Jazz, which trumpets jazz education as one of its prime missions, isn't more imaginative. Why isn't it doing more to keep the jazz front and center, to present a deep roster of indisputably excellent and exciting jazz musicians and to keep the festival forward-directed by highlighting some of the many amazing up-and-coming players who dedicate their lives to the art form?

### **Tribute to Holloway**

Because at some point - and the point already may be here - a jazz festival like this one starts to feel like a roll-out. We get a handful of aging players from the music's golden era alongside familiar faces (some of the same ones each year) and lots of tangential musicians, some better than others, whose relationship to jazz isn't always clear.

To be fair, there will be some dynamite players this year. A Main Stage tribute to saxophonist Red Holloway, who's turning 80, will feature Holloway and three other saxophone luminaries: Frank Morgan, Charles McPherson and Greg Osby. An all-star Latin band will include pianist Arturo O'Farrill, trumpeter Ray Vega and percussionists Steve Berrios and Pete Escovedo. Other stages will feature bassist David Friesen, trumpeters Eddie Gale and John Worley, trombonist Wayne Wallace and singer Jackie Ryan.

But compared to past years, the lineups look spotty, almost randomly assembled.

What's the vision here? Roach says he wants to "create this really fun community event, a musical event that people can come to and have fun." But isn't that what the festival has been for years? It's a huge block party. Great food. Good vibes. With lots of music on multiple stages - blues, salsa, Latin, R&B - but with jazz as the star of the show.

Roach said he wants to put an emphasis on "up-and-comers" in jazz. Great idea. I asked him to name some. He offered two: singers Denise Donatelli and Sasha Dobson. Fine. Can I suggest a few others?

There are many important young players who come from the Bay Area and, even if they've migrated to New York and elsewhere, often spend weeks here each summer. They include saxophonists Donny McCaslin (among the elite on his instrument, internationally) and Dayna Stevens (a protege of Wayne Shorter, he has an excellent new, all star-studded debut album) and trumpeters Ambrose Akinmusire and Jonathan Finlayson (both graduates of Berkeley High).

These are hot, innovative players - and fresh faces. Showcasing them with their own bands on the Main Stage would be a great idea. Or what if, with some planning, a couple of them were to form the front line of an all-star quintet with a Bay Area-bred rhythm section of bassist Larry Grenadier, pianist Taylor Eigsti and drummer Jeff Ballard?

The Bay Area is loaded with exceptional players who span jazz from straight-ahead to laptop-assisted and the acoustic avant-garde: drummers Scott Amendola, E.W. Wainwright, Steve Smith, Sameer Gupta and Zakir Hussain; pianist Myra Melford; clarinetist Ben Goldberg; guitarists Fred Frith and Henry Kaiser; saxophonists Howard Wiley and David Boyce; bassists Ray Drummond, Marcus Shelby and Cory Combs. Where are they on this lineup? And where is the Turtle Island String Quartet, which has a new recording of John Coltrane's "A Love Supreme?"

### **Synergy with Stanford**

What about vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson and saxophonist John Handy? They're iconic jazz figures - and they live here. How about creating some synergy with the Stanford Jazz Workshop? Its summer faculty includes Kenny Barron, Lee Konitz, Eddie Gomez, Jimmy Cobb, Matt Wilson, Wycliffe Gordon, Eigsti, Stevens and Akinmusire. Would it have been impossible to bring a few of them to the festival? Why not work at some cooperation in coming years?

Roach points out - as he did this time last year - that the festival lineup isn't yet complete. Maybe some heavies still will sign on. Maybe the Airmen of Note will turn out to be a killing band. And maybe Gerald Albright will decide that it's time to show off his jazz chops by blazing through "Giant Steps." I hope so.

But right now, this festival lacks vision.

18th Annual Comcast

San Jose Jazz Festival

Presented by Southwest Airline

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**Where:** 10 stages in downtown San Jose; the Main Stage is in Plaza de Cesar Chavez

**When:** Aug. 10-12 with a gala fundraiser Aug. 8

**Tickets:** \$5 (ticket prices for the fundraiser will be announced)

**More information:** (408)288-7557, [www.sanjosejazz.org](http://www.sanjosejazz.org)

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