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Better known in jazz circles for his swing clarinet playing, Dave Bennett shows off his rockabilly piano chops with his Memphis Speed Kings, augmented by trombonist Bill Allred, and draws a crowd of admiring fans in the wee small hours Sunday morning at the 24th Annual Suncoast Jazz Classic in Clearwater Beach, Florida last November. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

“Way Down Yonder in Florida...”

Clearwater’s once all-trad Suncoast Jazz Festival diversifies with rockabilly, country, Texas swing and more...and hits plenty of high notes. *Jersey Jazz’s* Mitchell Seidel reports.

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46TH Annual Pee Wee Russell Memorial Stomp!

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"Classic" is in the Eyes (and Ears) of the Beholders: The 24th Annual Suncoast Jazz Classic

Story and photos by Mitchell Seidel

At the Sheraton Sand Key Resort in Florida, visitors to the lobby bar might think they were caught in some musical time warp. The venue had been renamed "Condon's Corner" in honor of the renowned guitarist while a roomful of people are singing "When You're Smiling" to a band that looks like 1920s New Orleans has conquered 21st Century Clearwater Beach. In the meantime, large screen televisions throughout the room show the late season college football games. As the room lurches into "Nothing Could Be Finer Than to be in Carolina in the Morning," you can't help but notice the makeup of the massive trad jam occurring: There are dueling banjos, dueling cornets, dueling trombones and lordy be, even dueling washboards. Then a young woman starts singing "Has Anybody Seen my Gal" before channeling Betty Boop. If that wasn't enough, any uneven table legs in the room could have been remedied by a man playing musical saw.

The Suncoast Jazz Classic may have taken the word "Dixieland" out of its name, but that hasn't stopped the traditional sounds from seeping through the halls of the Sheraton Sandy Key and neighboring Marriott hotel across the street during the weekend before Thanksgiving. The 24th edition of the formerly all-trad event was an eclectic mélange of swing, Dixieland, bebop and even some rockabilly and soupçon of county thrown in. Such diversity assured that fans of any pre-modal music were assured of finding something to their liking while soaking up the jazz party atmosphere of several hotel venues.



Even the lobby statuary at the Sheraton Sand Key Hotel got into the spirit during the the Suncoast Jazz Classic.



Mealtime growing up must have been interesting (and probably still is). Jerseyans Joe and Paul Midiri, center, play for the swing dance party at the 24th Annual Suncoast Jazz Classic in Clearwater Beach, Florida. Bearing witness are bandmembers Dan Tobias on trumpet, left, Jim Lawler on drums and guitarist Bob Leary.

"We're not in Buffalo, and that alone is worth celebrating," said WUSF DJ Bob Seymour at a pre-fest do for sponsors

and major supporters, referring to an intense snowstorm that was covering northern New York as he spoke. Even more to celebrate was the three-day listing of various bands from across the country that required a three-page grid schedule of events. "You kind of have to check it like a racing form to see where you're going to be" Seymour said.

Despite an operation that included a host of corporate sponsors and a board of directors populated by local business leaders, the event seemed to be very much volunteer-driven, with unpaid fans doing everything from

setting out food in the musicians' green room to preparing folksy cardboard decorations for the ballrooms.

As one would expect with an event that boasted "TRAD and new TRADitions," surprises abounded. The St. Louis-based Cornet Chop Suey was in the midst of an expected set of trad and swing when co-leader and trumpeter Brian Casserly announced that they were about to take their set into the cinematic cosmos. "No matter where you go, if you've got a bar, you've got a good band, even if it's in a galaxy far, far away," he said before they launched into the "Cantina Song" from the movie *Star Wars*, one of the few times one was likely to hear that



Violinist Tom Rigney strikes a dynamic pose as he performs with his group, Flambeau. His repertoire went everywhere from the blues to country, with stops at pop and jazz.



Floridian Valerie Gillespie enthusiastically encourages “Special Youth Guest” Sukris Vong during his solo at the pre-fest sponsors’ gala at the Sheraton Sand Key. The young saxophonist was one of several local young performers given showcases at the 24th Annual Suncoast Jazz Classic.

tune at a jazz event.

Swing enthusiasts know Dave Bennett for his Benny Goodman-influenced clarinet performances, but his Rockabilly persona came to the fore this time in Florida with his Memphis Speed Kings. Yes, he was seen playing his clarinet at times during the weekend, but his renditions of Jerry Lee Lewis material drew a good number of fans who saw how early rock and rollers also knew how to slap the bass and play boogie-woogie piano.

Over at the Marriott, a swing dance party



It’s apparently been a long weekend for guitarist Bob Leary, second from left, as he chats with trumpeter Dave Tatrow while they wait their turn in the wings during the finale jam Sunday afternoon at the 24th Annual Suncoast Jazz Classic.

Foridians Nate Najar, left, and John Lamb duet Saturday evening at the Sheraton Sand Key Hotel during the 24th Annual Suncoast Jazz Classic.



took up most of the Classic’s opening night, with Jersey brothers Joe and Paul Midiri propelling the crowd with their swing era hijinks. And entire ballroom floor was cleared for dancers while listeners were accommodated along the walls and in the hallways.

One could well ask what San Francisco violinist Tom Rigney and his group Flambeau were doing at this festival, because there wasn’t much “pure” jazz to be heard in his performances, which were more infused with country, blues and pop. Of course, that was before you heard him

play. The flamboyant Rigney was a nonstop music machine, delivering consistently enjoyable sets and never failing to entertain. At his jazziest, Rigney and Flambeau owe a stylistic debt to Bob Wills and

the Texas Playboys and the violinist showed how he could get into swing during a late evening set with Florida clarinetist Bob Draga. Interestingly, Rigney’s crisp technique owes a lot more to classical than country or swing, as he doesn’t saw the instrument as you might have expected.

There were other attractions for those wandering the hotel hallways. The Classic, a not-for-profit event, presented several local student groups while also honoring former Duke Ellington bassist John Lamb for his work in local education circles. Selling books on their respective lives were Sharon Preston-Folta, on what it was like to be Louis Armstrong’s “secret” daughter and Herb Snitzer on his career of photographing the greats of jazz.

The Suncoast Jazz Classic hits the quarter-century mark November 20-22 this year. For more information contact the Suncoast Jazz Classic, Inc., P.O. Box 8707, Clearwater, Florida 33758. Phone 727-248-9441 or go to www.suncoastjazzclassic.com.

