

JerseyJazz

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above: Winard Harper Sextet; below: Allan Harris. Photos by Tony Mottola.

New Jersey Jazz Society

Jazzfest 2011

"Ring dem Bells!"

Jazzfest 2011 on June 11 at the College of Saint Elizabeth in Morristown kicked off with the ringing of the noon bells at Anunciation Hall just as Emily Asher's Garden Party was set to begin playing outside its entrance. That caused only a minor setback at our brand new venue where the benefits outweighed any clouds and drizzle. All activities had been seamlessly moved indoors, which turned out to be a boon for one and all, with no missed notes. Dolan Hall proved to be a beautiful venue and the Jazz Lobsters easily fanned across its stage. The languid start to "Splanky" gave way to a crisp, sparking horn crescendo. Bari sax man Larry McKenna was featured as arranger and soloist on "You Go to My Head," and his velvety, luxurious tone sparked bandleader/ pianist James Lafferty's

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Talking Jazz

A Jersey Jazz Interview with Sherrie Maricle

By Schaen Fox

When I first became aware of Sherrie Maricle, the thought of a woman in jazz doing anything beyond singing or playing piano was well out of the ordinary for me. When I saw her, I believe at an early NJJS function, I quickly forgot about her gender and enjoyed a stellar performance. Since then she has built up an impressive list of achievements. Her drumming prowess have not only landed her work with greats from Slam Stewart to Johnny Mandel, notable teaching posts and a position as an original member of the New York Pops, but have also made her a force in weakening the sexist limitations women face in the music business. Perhaps her greatest achievement to date has been her longstanding success with DIVA, her big band. Her busy schedule resulted in our doing this interview earlier this year by phone, online and in person.



JJ: Since this is for *Jersey Jazz*, has anything of note in your career happened in New Jersey?

SM: A very pivotal moment was when I played at a club in New Jersey with Clark Terry's quartet in the late '80s. That was a pretty monumental gig; vividly memorable, terrifying and awesome. Besides playing with Slam Stewart, that was the first time anybody famous and amazing thought I was good enough -to hire me. I copied the check he gave me and had it framed. [Chuckles]

JJ: How did he discover you?

SM: From my association with Slam Stewart, who I had been playing with since the early '80s. He lived in Binghamton, New York which is near the town where I grew up, Endicott, New York. Clark probably came to Binghamton and played a concert and I was the drummer. And I also met the bass player, Major Holley while playing with Slam. When I moved to New York, Major and his friend Pat Curry took me around, and I probably got reintroduced to Clark. He liked me and gave me this great chance and it was wonderful.

JJ: Would you tell us about your association with Slam Stewart?

SM: When I got into the State University at Binghamton, Slam would occasionally do concerts there and my teachers invited me to play with him. I was interested in jazz and knew who he was. Slam liked me and I got to play with him quite often. We used to rehearse at his house, and I remember doing the "Big Noise from Winnetka," and he was standing next to his dining room table, and I was sitting there playing on a placemat and thinking, "Man this guy played with Benny Goodman and Gene Krupa! Good Lord!" It was really fun.

He was a very famous figure where I grew up and was the kindest, most sweet, amazing, gentle, creative, wonderful person; one of the top I ever met in my life, and always really positive. It was amazing for me to be 17 and play with someone like Slam Stewart. You could go to school and study music for a million years and none of it would remotely compare with playing music with a Slam Stewart or Clark Terry. I was wildly fortunately enough to play on Slam's very last CD, which is in fact my very first CD. It's called *The Cats are Swinging*.

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John Pizzarelli, Peter Appleyard and a whole gaggle of great wonderful people are on that. Slam passed away when we weren't quite finished, so Major Holley finished it.

I love the bass. [Chuckles] It has always been my favorite instrument after the drums. I loved Ray Brown. He was one of the biggest influences on me. I just adored him. Yeah! Bass players are awesome! When I was a student I went to a workshop in Port Townsend, Washington. Bud Shank was in charge of it and Jeff Hamilton was the drum teacher. Jeff is one of my absolute idols of drumming and percussion. He has amazing technique and incredible taste. He is so creative and so swinging. So he was my teacher there and I think that made me love Ray Brown even more because it was Ray Brown and Jeff Hamilton and Gene Harris on piano there. If I had to identify the biggest influence on me, it was probably that. That group was so amazing to me.

JJ: By the way, did Slam ever tell you how he got his nickname?

SM: He said he got that name when he and Slim Gallard were trying to come up with something "hipper" than "Slim and Leroy."

JJ: OK. How did your family react to your career choice?

SM: I don't think they believed me at first. When I was in 7th grade, a teacher took me to see Buddy Rich and I ran home and told my mother that I was going to play the drums. That is all I have ever wanted to do since that moment. I don't think my mom believed me. "Oh, sure, sweetheart. (Pat, pat, shove, shove) Go away now." Then as she sensed I was serious about it and how involved I was in my high school band program. She started to get worried and begged me to study computers. [Chuckles]

No sane person thinks, "Oh, I'll play the drums for a living." It gets to be you are living to play the drums; you love it so much that you can't even imagine anything else. That is what happened to me. My mom worried that I wouldn't be able to make a living. My first professional gig was when I was 16, with Bob Grover and the Tune Twisters. I had been working a cashier gig all week for minimum wage, and I made, like, \$43. Then I got my first gig and it was four hours of playing. I was having the time of my life and I made \$50. I was so excited and happy I ran out and forgot to get paid. The bandleader

And I played all over, like everybody does. You play for the door, you play for a dollar, and you play with everyone. Every time you just say, "Yes, yes, yes." Once you are able to relax into the scene a bit, then you are able to make more logical choices instead of running yourself ragged.

brought it over the next day. After I started to make money, mom relaxed a little. [Chuckles]

JJ: Did you have much trouble establishing yourself as a working musician when you moved to New York City?

SM: My plan was no plan whatsoever. I told everyone, "I'm just moving to New York." Then at my last semester of school a group came from New York with Bob Brookmeyer and Michael Moore, the bass player. I said to Michael, "Yeah, I'm going to move to New York when I'm done with school." He said, "Oh? Well I teach at NYU; maybe you could consider coming to grad school." I got a little light bulb moment. "Oh. That could be interesting." I never thought about grad school until then. I was going to move and just play.

I auditioned at NYU and got a scholarship to get my Master's degree in jazz performance. They really enjoyed the work I was doing. I started a percussion program there. There wasn't any when I got there. I was in the jazz department, but I loved percussion. Then they asked me to stay and gave me a fellowship to get my doctorate. I had no plan to do that whatsoever. [Chuckles] I got to New York and did not panic about an apartment because the school had great apartments for grad students; right on the corner of 3rd Street and LaGuardia

Place, which let me go to the Blue Note jam session every night. [It] was right up the street.

Through a school connection, I ran a jam session at the Village Gate every Saturday for eight years. I had my trio and we got 50 bucks a piece. I got to meet so many people and play in a famous, wonderful jazz club. It was great. And I played all over, like everybody does. You play for the door, you play for a dollar, and you play with everyone. Every time you just say, "Yes, yes, yes." Once you are able to relax into the scene a bit, then you are able to make more logical choices instead of running yourself ragged. [Chuckles]

JJ: So who did you meet at The Gate?

SM: Harry Connick was in there just hanging out before he was "Harry Connick." There were so many great people who are my peers who may not be conventionally famous, but to me they are. Probably the most notable person was Jaco Pastorius. He was just walking around Bleeker Street and came in and wanted to play. I didn't recognize him at first. It was, "Who is that strange-looking guy trying to play the bass?" He didn't look very good, kind of run down. Then he started and I was like, "Oh!" He stayed on stage and played solo and with some other people. It was great. He was just a virtuosic player.

JJ: Do you have any souvenirs you would like to tell us about?

SM: Like my Kennedy Center Lifetime Achievement Award? That's pretty amazing. As far as cool stuff from famous people, I wouldn't say I have much. I have Slam Stewart's cap. I love that. It would probably be meaningless to anybody else, but I see him in that hat every time I look at it. When he passed away, his wife, Clare, gave it to me, and a necklace that says SLAM. I have loads of mementos of the dearest person in the world to me — Stanley Kay.

JJ: OK, let's talk about your association with Stanley. How did you meet?

SM: I was hired to play for the 75th anniversary of the Shubert Theater in New Haven, in May of 1990. It was a variety show with several artists and Stanley was conducting for Maurice Hines. They had a great book and it was fun to play. Stanley liked it. We kind of struck up a friendship and stayed in touch. In 1992, he called me. He wanted to form DIVA. We had a meeting at The Violet Café and he asked, "Do you know women that play as well as you?" which, to me, was an awesome compliment. "Buddy Rich's manager thinks I play the drums good!" I said, "I do." I was really enthusiastic and excited to be involved with Stanley.

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I never wanted to be involved with all-women projects because I was always aggravated by them. It seemed the stereotype was, "Well, I don't really play that well so I'll wear a short skirt and show my cleavage and put on globs of makeup and people will hire me because I look a certain way." That was such a detrimental stereotype of woman instrumentalists. I avoided those situations. I wanted to blend in and have people pay attention to my drumming. I knew Stanley was all about the music so I took this as a really great opportunity to contact these incredible players that I knew who experienced the same "Women in Jazz" issues. I said this is going to be a serious band playing exciting, powerful, great big band music. We had auditions and picked the original 17 people and had the first DIVA rehearsal in June of 1992.

I doubt I will ever meet another human being as amazing as Stanley Kay. He was fun and so extraordinarily creative and wonderful and giving and such a wonderful, wonderful man. I can't say enough positive words about him and how much I love him and miss him. He was great at coming up with concepts for tunes and arrangements. He didn't know how to write music but he would sing everything and the arrangers would transcribe it and create the arrangements. He did our Ella Fitzgerald medley. Stanley conceived and worked through with Tommy Newsom some of our most astounding music. He was never the kind of person who wanted money and be taking everything for himself and not paying people. He was the opposite of that. He was just kind and caring and always wanted to give and make sure everyone was taken care of.

DIVA is going to do a recording of all Stanley's original music [including] one song that he wrote with Jon Hendricks called "Nothin." I'm doing this because I've started a scholarship fund and I'll put

all the money from this CD in the fund to help budding drummers specializing in big band because that was Stanley's true passion. And we have our new Johnny Mandel CD coming out. That was Stanley's idea. Stanley was friends with Johnny from the Buddy Rich days in the '40s. The last thing Stanley got to see us do was [make] that recording at Dizzy's.



Sherrie appeared at NJJS Jazzfest with her small group Five Play in 2007 (shown here) and returned to headline the event with the full DIVA Big Band in 2009. Photo by Tony Mottola.

JJ: Stanley must have had stories about Buddy Rich.

SM: I think Stanley and he were like brothers. They went to baseball games and did fun things together. I know many instances where Buddy helped other musicians who were down and out. There is one story where he put a drummer into the band and paid him a salary because the guy was busted. They had a two or three week engagement somewhere, so Buddy said, "Stick him in the band and put him on bongos." He did seem to have a very nice side.

JJ: You mentioned Tommy Newsom. How did you become connected with him?

SM: Again, through Stanley because Tommy had written so many things for Buddy. Tommy really liked DIVA. He was one of our biggest contributors. Sometimes he would just write a chart and send it even when we didn't ask him for it. "I was thinking of you guys." [Chuckles] He was just, again, a

warmhearted, lovely, peaceful man — so really, really humble.

I wanted to take some arranging lessons from him. I'm furious that I never just made the time but he would send me things. He would analyze Mozart and Bach and send, "Isn't this the most amazing E-flat chord you ever heard?" And he would outline things in the classical repertoire and he was always sharing his insights. He was really generous and underrated for his phenomenal skills. His humor was very, very dry. He was a witty, but understated person and hysterically funny. He was producing a CD for us once and I was trying to get the bass player a pizzicato solo and this bass player would usually do the opposite thing I asked her to do. Of course she starts playing an arco solo that was insanely out there and avant-garde. Tommy was sitting in the control booth and said, "Melissa, that was very interesting, bordering on the bizarre."

JJ: Would you share your thoughts

on the late Billy Taylor?

SM: Wow, what he did for women in jazz when he started the Mary Lou Women in Jazz Festival! Outstanding! He created a wonderful way to honor many people who often slide right under the radar screens of people putting on jazz festivals. Often, I think it is like, "OK, maybe we should have one token woman group." Billy helped eradicate a lot of that. He was such a great supporter of DIVA. He chose DIVA to be on his television special of the 25th anniversary of the Kennedy Center. That was a major TV show and we were the jazz segment with Billy playing and Dee Dee Bridgewater. That said so much about how he viewed music, like Stanley's famous saying: "If you can play, you can play; if you can't play, you can't play." That was all Billy cared about.

What DIVA has done because of the quality of the band and the players has elevated that "Woman in Jazz" scenario, especially in the beginning because

there were so many strong, incredible players all at once. It was very different from, "Oh, there is Ingrid Jensen or Anat Cohen," or whoever it was; always singular people who were extraordinary. Now you had a band with a quality person in every chair and being all women made such an impact. It really changes perceptions. Billy was responsible for a lot of that at the beginning for putting us in places that allowed us to be seen in a big way and get media attention. That is why, when we did the re-shoot of the photograph, "A Great Day in Harlem," we did the reverse of it. We had all women with three men: Stanley, Billy Taylor and Bob Cranshaw, the three that ignored our gender and cared more about our music. Are you familiar with this project, *The Girls in the Band*?

JJ: No.

SM: You can watch the trailer for it on Facebook [or at www.thegirlsintheband.com]. It is the history of women instrumentalists and it goes way back before the Sweethearts and all through contemporary musicians. The education part of this is incredible because so many women are overlooked in every aspect of history. Jazz is just one area. We reshot the photograph in front of the original brownstone. The real cool thing is that Marion McPartland is in it and she was in the original.

JJ: Is there a film or book that you would recommend to give us non-musicians some idea of what a musician's life is like?

SM: I love the book *Swing Shift* by Sherry Tucker. That is about women's big bands through the Swing Era. I was clueless about how many there were working their brains out, especially during World War II.

JJ: I am impressed with DIVA's unusually high international membership. Is that accidental?

SM: Defiantly. The reason they are here is that coming to the birthplace of jazz is special to their careers. That I know for sure. When these women decided they wanted to be jazz musicians for a living, they wanted to come here. Whether they came to the United States to go to Berklee or other schools, a majority of them ended up in New York. We became a magnet for great women players from all over, so we had Carol Lina from Austria, Anat Cohen from Israel, Lisa and Nicki Parrott from Australia, Grazia Di Giorgio from Italy and Tomoko Ohno and Noriko Ueda from Japan. We even had a woman from Iceland sub once on piano. I'm proud that New York is the center for jazz, according to all of my international friends.

I remember in the beginning we were criticized because there weren't any black people in the

band. We were, like, "But, nobody came to audition. That's not our fault." Men play in DIVA sometimes. I don't care about anything except the way that you play music. If a woman can't play well enough to

My dream was to be in Woody Herman's band. Buddy Rich's was always one of my favorite bands, but I obviously had no shot of being in that. [Laughs] I really enjoyed listening to Basie but there was something in Woody Herman's repertoire that really appealed to me. I was always sending audition tapes to get into that band, but I never did.

play lead trumpet, we are getting a guy. There is no way after all that DIVA has achieved that anything is going to come in the way of it being musically excellent.

JJ: And DIVA has backed an impressive list of vocalists.

SM: I'm not a wild fan of all jazz singers and yet, blessedly, DIVA has worked with Joe Williams, Nancy Wilson, Carmen Bradford, Ann Hampton Calloway, Marlena Shaw, Jack Jones and just some really awesome singers. We have been so lucky to have been in collaborative efforts with these geniuses who bring a whole level of a different kind of life experience.

Guests allow us to delve into iconic big band music. We play our original charts. We never want to do anyone else's except in this situation. It was so thrilling to play a great Basie chart with Carmen Bradford, knowing she recorded it with Basie. I actually got goose bumps. This is one of the greatest compliments I ever heard; Carmen turned around, after the first chart, looked at me and said, "DAMN, Sherrie!" She was freaked out that the band was swinging like it was. It was so much fun. That's very similar to the first time Nancy Wilson heard DIVA. She was being honored in this "Women in Jazz" event we were hosting. She was sitting in the front row and we played the first note and her eyes got so big it was funny. She probably didn't expect it either.

JJ: Who came up with the name "DIVA"?

SM: Stanley, thinking of the positive connotations, meaning "outstanding," "virtuoso" and "exceptional." But then in Stanford a promoter looked at us and goes, "Hey, look. It's no man's band." [Chuckles] Stanley got a big kick out of that, so it became the tag line for the group, "DIVA, No Man's Band." Of course, then we changed it, because we did have men in the band.

JJ: Had you thought about having a big band before Stanley approached you with the idea?

SM: No. I'd dreamt of playing in one since I was a young kid. My dream was to be in Woody Herman's band. Buddy Rich's was always one of my favorite bands, but I obviously had no shot of being in that. [Laughs] I really enjoyed listening to Basie but there was something in Woody Herman's repertoire that really appealed to me. I was always sending audition tapes to get into that band, but I never did.

JJ: Musicians sometimes are constantly playing one chart. How do you feel about that?

SM: Every band has their warhorses. One of ours would be the song that Stanley wrote for us called "Three Sisters and a Cousin" a tribute to Woody Herman and his "Four Brothers." I love the chart. It is exciting and fun to play and for at least the last 10 years it is the song we use most for an encore. People expect it and a couple times yell out for it. I consider that such an honor that people know our repertoire and request specific tunes and arrangements. Another one would be our arrangement of "Caravan" by Michael Abenny. Sometimes I get — I can't say "sick of it," but we play it so often I'm always trying to find new ways to make it interesting. That's an amazing arrangement; a big final drum solo thing that people like to hear and I

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love to play. It is just that I'm always trying to find new and better ways to make it exciting.

JJ: DIVA's membership is so stable it seems almost like a family.

SM: We've been really so fortunate in that we have had such incredibly great human beings in the band that both Stanley and I genuinely like and respect on all levels. Stanley used to say, "The music is all great, and that's obvious, but look at these deep, serious long-running friendships." It's not just an acquaintance you see on the gig. We socialize outside of the band and we help each other with moving, pet sitting, baby sitting, whatever it might be. I'm very happy with that.

I've been in the New York Pops for 20 years, and believe it or not, you can be in an orchestra that big and sometimes you don't even know everybody's name; especially if you are in one section and they are in another. I found that bizarre. [Chuckles] Granted, there are 75 or 80 people on stage at any given time. So there are circumstances where you can get together and make amazing music and not even know who you are playing with.

JJ: What are your thoughts about touring these days?

SM: In the mid '90s we were touring a lot more. The band still goes to Europe once a year, sometimes more, but we used to go three or four times. We would go out on the road for 10 weeks, now maybe a week or 10 days max. That is true for all of my groups. The expense is astronomical now that travel regulations have become so complicated. That makes it so awful when you have to travel with equipment and deal with a big number of people with instruments.

Anyone who has traveled can tell you there is no rhyme or reason or rules to what the airline people tell you. Sometimes, we can tour in Europe or in the United States, and we will have exactly the same equipment and one day it is free, the next day it costs \$500. So you are there with your music trunks for example — and this drives me insane — I'll have some of the drums and music cases, "The music case is five pounds overweight.

So take two music folders out of this luggage and put it in this other piece and you can take it." But we have 20 pieces of luggage and it all boils down to the same weight. It seems so weird.

It is always a nightmare traveling with your band library, anyway, because there is a 50 percent chance it is going to get lost. Then you are really in a mess, when your trombone and saxophone books go to London and the rest go to Germany — which has happened to us. The music and my cymbals went to London and we were in Munich. I said, "I know everyone is used to reading, but chances are you have this stored somewhere in your head. Just do the best you can." And people remembered a lot more than they thought they did.

JJ: You have a thank you to George Steinbrenner on the TNT CD. Didn't you think that would cost you sales up in Boston?

SM: [Laughs] He was really humble about it and didn't want to be thanked. No, I figured if his name was on it the Boston fans might buy them and use as Frisbees to womp on the Yankees.

JJ: Seriously, Stanley had a long association with the Yankees. Did he also make you a fan?

SM: All due to Mr. Kay. I liked baseball, but I didn't have any great loyalty. George Steinbrenner was a huge music fan and loved jazz. He played the drums when he was a kid. He was very sweet. His generosity was quite remarkable. For example, Stanley was in the hospital for six weeks, Steinbrenner came multiple times to visit and paid Stanley's whole bill. Another [time], George was outside the stadium and said "Hi" to a little kid. The kid didn't answer and the boss said, "What's wrong kid? Cat got your tongue?" The parents said, "Oh, Mr. Steinbrenner, he's deaf." George felt so bad he invited the family to the game any time they ever wanted for free. [Chuckles] Not a lot of people knew those special stories. DIVA got to play several special events for the Steinbrenners personally, and we played all the Welcome Home dinners and at the stadium for the "Star Spangled Banner." It was fun to be involved with the family and I know his daughter and his granddaughter Haley Swindal.

JJ: Now, that is interesting. Finally, do you have other interests besides baseball?

SM: I love running. I've run the Steamtown Marathon in Pennsylvania and several half marathons in all five boroughs. I would love to do [them] again, except the training is so time consuming. I love hiking. I hike Bear Mountain and the Catskills and I love movies and murder mysteries.

JJ: OK, we will end on that. Thank you so much for your time.

SM: Yeah, and thank you for your interest. JJ

Here are some of Sherrie's upcoming performances:

- June 7 with Marlene VerPlanck at the Ridgewood Band Shell in Ridgewood, NJ
- June 14 with the New York Pops in Central Park
- August 6 with Five Play at the Deer Head Inn in Delaware Water Gap, PA
- Sherrie is also the Jazz Director for the New York Summer Music Festival from June 26 to July 9.

Schaen Fox is a longtime jazz fan. Now retired, he devotes much of his time to the music, and shares his encounters with musicians in this column.