

JAZZ JAZZ JAZZ JAZZ

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LAKE GEORGE

A FREE ANNUAL FESTIVAL
DRAWS INTERNATIONAL TALENT

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURA CARBONE





With Lake George as backdrop, the jazz fest features an eclectic two-day lineup; at left, guitarist Michael Veleanu leans into a Django-inspired solo. Facing page, clockwise from left: Briggan Krauss, of Sex Mob, on alto saxophone. Flautist and bandleader Jane Bunnett. Vocalist Dayme Arocena, of the Cuban group Maqueque. Page 39: Israeli clarinetist Anat Cohen.



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OUR YEARS AGO during Jazz at the Lake—Lake George Arts Project’s annual music festival on the western shore of Lake George—the virtuosic young sax player Grace Kelly was blowing soulfully through Gershwin’s “Summertime” when a passing steamboat sounded its horn. She paused for a second and ad-libbed to the crowd, “That was in B flat, am I right?” The delighted crowd shouted out a few of its own guesses at the possible key, and Kelly carried on with even more verve. The moment was emblematic of the unique brand of camaraderie between performer and audience that can be found at this most intimate and laid-back of jazz festivals.

The two-day affair enjoys a relaxed, picturesque setting in the natural amphitheater at Shepard Park, just off Canada Street in the center of Lake George village. The amphitheater, located on a sward of sloping, terraced lawn, was dedicated in 1917. At the time, it was situated between two inns, now van-

ished. Today, the venue is shaded by majestic sugar maples and graced with a serpentine wall and stone pathway. The crowd—upwards of 3,000 people attend during a typical festival—sits on blankets and folding chairs. There are children and dogs about. Food vendors offer chili, meatball subs, popcorn, candy apples, caramel and kettle corn. And the backdrop—the shimmering Queen of American Lakes—is unforgettable, especially at the start of Saturday’s evening performance, when the sun setting over Prospect Mountain



turns the lake surface to an aluminum blaze. Over the course of the two days there are seven acts (four on Saturday, including the evening headliner, and three on Sunday—see sidebar, page 42).

Talk to the musicians backstage (because you can) and you hear nothing but praise for not only the extraordinary setting but the quality of the audiences—“Attentive and adventurous,” said brass player Steve Bernstein last September. “It’s like a conversation, as intimate as a jazz club.” Drummer Billy Martin praised the sophistication of the crowd, rapt and appreciative during quiet passages, applauding solos, roaring approval, coaxing encores out of every act. “You can’t help dig it,” said Martin, who’d never been to the area.

The intimate club feel is no accident. Poet and novelist Paul Pines, the festival’s curator for the last 32 years, ran his own legendary jazz club, The Tin Palace, on Manhattan’s Lower East Side during the gritty 1970s. His novel based on that time, *The Tin Angel*, sold more than 100,000 copies and is still in print. But Pines, by his own admission, burned out, moved to Belize, and then, on a lark, accepted a two-month writer’s residency in 1984, arranged by his friend, the poet William Bronk. While giving workshops at the Crandall Library in Glens Falls, Pines was

asked by Lake George Arts Project director John Strong to help out with the inaugural jazz weekend. He did. And then he met his future wife—and never left.

Over the years Pines has helped educate a generation of locals curious about jazz and in the market for a relaxing September weekend. His line-ups have mixed traditional jazz with edgy experimentation and novel combos. “There is a magic here between the audience and the players,” said Pines. “When you are at the event, it’s as if no one wants to leave.”



The natural amphitheater at Lake George's Shepard Park offers relaxed, intimate listening as well as stunning lake views.

THE BEAT GOES ON

This year's Jazz at the Lake, September 19–20, has a typically diverse roster, including a one-time guitar prodigy, a brilliant flautist, a revolutionary accordion player, and a Marsalis as headliner.

SATURDAY

1 p.m. Julian Lage Trio

Lage, a one-time guitar prodigy who merited a documentary (the Oscar-nominated *Jules at Eight*) leads his trio.

2:45 Jamie Baum Septet

The young flautist has toured everywhere and she is a *Down-Beat* favorite.

4:30 The Jazz Passengers

"Hard bop as imagined by Frank Zappa" was one critic's description. Led by Roy Nathanson, whose music has been used in Robert Altman films.

7:30 Jason Marsalis Vibes Quartet

The youngest member of America's royal family of jazz, who turned from drumming to the vibraphone. Said by some to be "the most interesting musician in his illustrious jazz clan."

SUNDAY

1 p.m. Victor Prieto Trio

The accordion is an important instrument in early jazz, and Prieto has revolutionized the technique, using a chord approach on both hands.

2:45 "Works" with Joe Lovano

Lovano is a giant among today's saxophonists, and he steps in with an innovative Brooklyn collective.

4:30 Ghost Train Orchestra

Led by Brian Carpenter, who specializes in new arrangements of chamber jazz from the 1930s. *New York City Jazz Record* wrote, "There hasn't been big band music as exciting as this since forever."

Pines used the contacts he had developed with booking agents and musicians to get the festival going. His eclectic tastes and his grounding in tradition have earned the respect of musicians around the world.

"He does a great lineup every year—always different, but always fresh," said Steve Bernstein, who has played here with three different groups over the years. "People ask, 'Where are these acts on the regular US circuit?' They aren't. They are in Europe, where good jazz is state-supported." Pines—



Shepard Park. Introducing Sunday's first act, Pines said, "There's no place in the world, indoors or out, where you can hear jazz of this quality—for free."

Pines works on each program for over a year. "I think of it as a poem," he said, "a composition. I am drawn to certain people and something coheres." Pines has no formula—jazz is at heart an improvisational art form. But most years the talent includes a sampling of Latin-inflected bands, big orchestras, vocalists and young, cutting-edge acts. "Every poem is different," said Pines.

For Pines, "Jazz is not only a great historical narrative but a litmus test of our ability to embrace tradition and renewal at the same time. It's an awareness in the arts that can't be accessed any other way." And seldom in a lawn chair by a lake. 🌿

who has booked the likes of Henry Threadgill, Hilton Ruiz, Sheila Jordan, Don Byron and Gary Burton—attributes the fine lineups he's had to "a bit of leverage in booking. In mid-September, acts are just returning from their summer gigs in Europe and the fall season hasn't begun yet."

Last fall, there was rain for only the third time in 31 years. On Saturday, the event moved inside to the Lake George High School auditorium, where an irrepressible Pines marveled at the acoustics indoors, the "great sight lines" and the continued intimacy of the event. On Sunday, crisp sunshine brought the event back to