



The Hartford Jazz Orchestra's Monday night gigs at the Arch Street Tavern include Seb Giacco, Erik Elligers and Zeke Vasques (left to right).

Preserving the past

For 45 years, the Hartford Jazz Orchestra has been **bringing old standards to life**

■ Tom Mulcahy and I were standing near the bar at the Arch Street Tavern in Hartford, wondering where the buzz was coming from. It had nothing to do with alcohol; over the din of chattering patrons we heard an electronic hum, which Mulcahy realized was coming from one of the video screens – otherwise blank – near the ceiling above where the Hartford Jazz Orchestra was about to play.

As manager of the group, it was his responsibility to make sure the conditions were just right for the orchestra's Monday night gig, and the buzz would be bothersome to the musicians and their esteemed conductor, Donn Trenner, as they opened with an old Count Basie tune, *Warm Summer Breeze*.

So through the din and dimness, Mulcahy called out to the tavern manager, and a few moments later, the buzz subsided.

Mulcahy, an alert and amiable pro who's been toiling in the biz, one way or another, for decades, sat down and motioned for me to do the same. He let out a sigh that showed he was

both bushed and satisfied at the same time, and said, "The owner told me that as long as this place remains open, the Hartford Jazz Orchestra will have a place to play."

Good thing, too, for it is an explicable fact that the ensemble does not have quite the reputation or drawing power that its superb big band sound easily suggests.

Part of the reason may be that it is more a labor of love than an exercise in commerce. Comprised of 15 skilled musicians, most of whom support themselves with other professional endeavors (there are a few teachers, a lawyer, a retailer and a bunch of retirees), **the orchestra meets every Monday night at Arch**

by Joel Samberg
photos by Lisa Brisson



Bobbi Rogers has been singing professionally since the 1950s. "The love of music keeps us going."

Street for what its members consider both a rehearsal and a performance.

There is neither time nor money for the kind of marketing that might get them booked into other venues around the state. They have never even played at the annual Greater Hartford Festival of Jazz, although a festival spokesperson indicated that it's because no one in the group ever submitted their name.

It is likely that the Monday night gig is so comfortably set in stone for these devoted players that no one ever thought to check it out. And even if someone did do the kind of research necessary to get them into jazz festivals, which they'd

all love to do, or to play major engagements elsewhere – which they do from time to time, but rarely – the group as a whole might have to say no, unless there was adequate compensation to allow for putting their other lives on hold for a while. (They're not paid for the Arch Street appearances.) It's a jazzy version of Catch-22.

When the Hartford Jazz Orchestra was first formed in West Hartford, the driving goal was to find unique and interesting song charts (the written arrangements for each instrument) and then build a capable band around them. Jazz by then had been defined and redefined more times than the number

of decades in which it had been played: Ragtime, Dixieland, Swing, Bebop, Fusion, Cool and several others. I was always torn between the styles; my father listened to the big band jazz of Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller, my music teachers and friends to the cool jazz of Dave Brubeck and Stan Getz. I equally enjoyed the Great American Songbook standards of the former, and the somewhat freer, looser cuts of the latter. Both provided me with a sense of excitement and constancy. That's the gift of jazz, no matter what it's called.

When my daughter Celia was attending UConn and working part-time at the restaurant where trumpeter Dave Stangarone tended bar, she learned of the orchestra and, knowing that my wife and I wanted to relocate from New Jersey to Connecticut, eagerly told me about them.

I've been a fan ever since – part of a small and exclusive club.

"I've been playing big band music my entire life," said Stangarone, the group's 37-year-old trumpeter player, who is a graduate of the Berklee College of Music in Boston and also a member of the popular Motown tribute band, Souled Out. "I don't know any other style as well. A few years ago, I got a chance to jam with them and I loved it. When they lost a trumpet player, I was asked to take over, and I loved it even more.

If I can, I'll be with them 20 years from now."

That's how they all feel about it.

The Hartford Jazz Orchestra had 40 years of practice under its belt by the time Stangarone joined. Accounts of its true origins vary somewhat from veteran to veteran, though trumpeter Dick Prestige indicates that it was his idea, and that through the efforts of the one-time head of the music department at West Hartford's Hall High School, Bill Stanley – who was known to have access to good charts – the band came to life.

In addition to Prestige, there are three other original members still playing with the orchestra: Sebastian Giacco on saxophone, and Jack Nedorostek and Don West on trumpet. Along with younger colleagues who have come and gone (the youngest now, Dan Hendrix on trombone, is 30), their collective devotion to jazz has not changed through the years. Today's lineup includes five saxophones, four trumpets, four trombones, drums, string bass, and an electric keyboard handled by the conductor. **Most of the regulars were born and raised in Connecticut.**

I asked Giacco what he thought of today's musicians. "To make a living in music is just about impossible these days," he began, trailing off, lost in the thought of it and not really answering the question. But I knew

what he wanted to say, only because I had already spoken to other band members and had heard them play several times. It was obvious that these guys (and one gal, saxophonist Lisa Ladone) were all dedicated pros who loved what they did and would continue to do whatever possible to keep music an integral part of their lives. Although gig-night apparel changes from player to player – jeans and pullovers for some, dress slacks and button-down shirts for others – **on each of their faces**

is the very same look of wistfulness and passion when they play. Not unlike the songs themselves.

Each member of the Hartford Jazz Orchestra helps guide its musical spirit, but there are two other guiding spirits truly responsible for its durability, the late composer-arranger Charles “Chic” Cicchetti and conductor Trenner, who came aboard in 1999 through the efforts of Giacco.

Cicchetti, a gifted arranger whose layered and lively charts are at

once simple and sophisticated, is noted by many pros to have been among the best in the business. His catalog makes up the vast majority of what the Hartford Jazz Orchestra plays. He once served as the musical director for entertainer Sergio Franchi and worked on many notable jazz albums before passing away in 2000.

“Because of what Chic wrote, and because of what the charts demand, we expect nothing less than excellence in our players,” notes Trenner, a gentleman who’s been in

the business for half a century, and who is as unpretentious and sophisticated as the charts themselves. “In fact, any player who can’t make it one night is responsible for finding a more-than-qualified replacement. Not just a player, but a qualified replacement.”

Trenner, who also works with his own trio and, until recently, helped contract entertainment for the Mohegan Sun, cuts quite a dapper figure in front of the band and behind his keyboard. It is that same dapper figure, in its younger version, who traveled in some impressive musical circles, including time as the musical director for Steve Allen’s TV show.

Trenner regularly chats with the audience about Cicchetti’s talents as an arranger, never forgets to mention the soloists after every number, and frequently tells stories about the songs he selects.

One other announcement Trenner makes every Monday night is this: “It’s Bobbi Rogers time!”

Rogers has been singing professionally since the 1950s. When she sings – often classics like *How About You?* and sometimes show tunes like *Hello, Young Lovers* – she somehow evokes an aura of musical royalty.

“**It is the love of music that keeps us going,**” Rogers said, referring to people of her ilk, which includes the musicians, the conductor,



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and many in the audience. "And it seems to carry from generation to generation." While many band members were born a lifetime ago, a few others could be her grandchildren.

Although she had "conventional" careers as a teacher and pediatric nurse, she can also count among her musical highlights appearances at New York's Copacabana, at Michael's Pub (where Woody Allen used to play clarinet), on *Good Morning, America* and as a guest singer on several albums, including a few made with Cicchetti.

Arch Street Tavern, which opened in 1978, is a one-story brick building stuck in an untidy corner just southwest of where interstates 84 and 91 cross. Construction dominates the scene; the Front Street District project is slowly going up nearby, promising new residential, retail and entertainment neighbors. But that's in the future. Today, only the tavern seems to bring life to the corner.

Other acts appear there from time to time; the Hartford Jazz Orchestra is a mainstay. Most Mondays, the house

is full. Management and staff speak fondly of the orchestra regulars, whom they consider friends – friends they admire because of what they do and how well they do it.

Besides, they're all so friendly. Which is why it's almost painful to hear them bemoan the fact that their beloved group has not gotten the attention it deserves. I've heard it uttered several times, but I don't know what to do about it. I have no professional connections. Plus, I'm new in town. In fact, as a guy who's used to the Jersey suburb sidewalks, I was

even a little ill at ease the first time I walked down Arch Street to get a writer's feel for the location. It was winter, and the street was messy, cold and foreboding. But then I went inside the tavern. The orchestra was playing *It Might as Well Be Spring*, which Trenner called one of Cicchetti's best arrangements.

Forget about messy, cold and foreboding. Yes, it certainly might as well have been spring, because **it was the most pleasant evening I had had in a long time.** HM

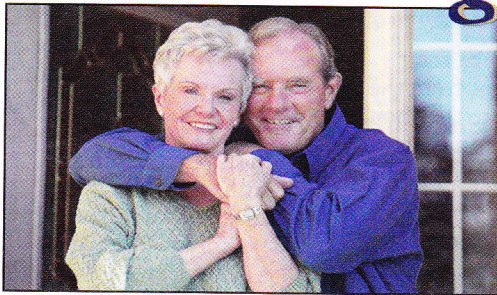
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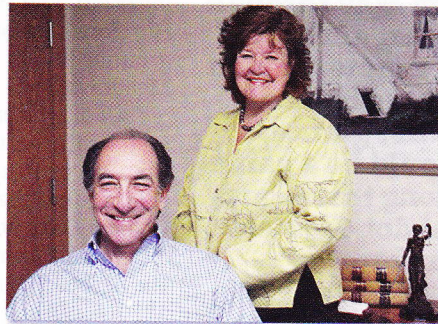
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