

Down the generations: The Newport Jazz Festival in 2023

My third time at Newport Jazz Festival, attending just on the Saturday and Sunday of the three-day festival, I was struck by the commanding presence of one octogenarian after another and the reverent appreciation lavished on them by a sold-out crowd. The mystic Charles Lloyd (85) came on early on Saturday and a funky Herbie Hancock (83) closed out the festival on Sunday. In between, we heard from headliner Charles McPherson (84) and also from Bob James (83) as part of Christian McBride's versatile Jam Jawn band. The festival was appropriately capped off by Hancock picking up his "keytar," a hand-held electric-piano-like instrument, and practically levitating off the stage.



Herbie Hancock playing the keytar, Aug. 6, 2023
Photos © Steve Dickman

Many performers mentioned their previous appearances at Newport – some of these musicians had played there with Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie among others – but one stood out: Joshua Redman pointed out that the stellar quartet “*Redman, Mehldau, McBride, Blade*” had played its nearly-first-ever gig on exactly the same stage at

Newport in 1993, thirty Augusts ago. It felt like a wormhole had opened up in the space-time continuum as we got to hear the now-head-shaven Redman and the grizzled Mehdau and their bandmates supplant a stellar '93 set with a spectacular one in 2023. Already masters way back then, this group delivered stunning straight-ahead blues and jazz tunes such as Undertow, which featured blistering solos by first Redman and then Mehdau. As consummate jazz writer Nate Chinen put it in [his review of the festival](#), “Each member of the band has earned an eminent stature over the last 30 years, fulfilling or exceeding his early promise. They’re all better musicians now, with a vast range of experience, and yet their shared language extends from a familiar core...”

More straight-ahead bliss and blasting was provided by the exquisitely talented quintet of Orrin Evans, who played for a full house under one of the smaller tents, and again in the same locale by the piano trio of Bill Charlap. Anyone who squeezed into this packed venue was in for some supreme blowing. Evans, a Philadelphia-born pianist with a still-growing reputation after nearly 30 years in the business, gave the audience a treat in his tight set featuring Canadian trumpet legend Ingrid Jensen, saxophonist/flutist Gary Thomas (a musician’s musician), bassist Luques Curtis and drummer Mark Whitfield Jr.



**Orrin Evans
Aug. 5, 2023**

Charlap, wearing dark glasses almost more to *hide* his intent than to shade his eyes from the dim light *under* the tent, seemed almost defiant as he strutted on stage. He flew out of the starting blocks with bravado and knew exactly how to build energy through his set, winding up several tunes with stunning runs and grand-piano-shaking endings. A visual and aural treat for those of us lucky to be sitting up close.

A different kind of illumination was brought by Scary Goldings, the name for an ultrahip high-gloss electric funk band that combines Scary Pockets, a duo comprised of Ryan Lerman on rhythm guitar and Jack Conte on electric piano, that added the supreme master of funk organ Larry Goldings. Among the other special guests were the group's frequent companion John Scofield, a 71-year-old (but who cares?!), and Australian bassist Tal Wilkenfeld, 36, who has been bopping between the electric jazz (Hancock) and rock-and-roll (Jeff Beck, Prince) scene for about fifteen years. Though she did not take a solo, it felt like Wilkenfeld held the group together and pushed an infectious beat through a heavily moving audience. One [published report](#) called Wilkenfeld a "secret weapon." Their set included "Professor Vicarious" (Conte said this had been Miles Davis' nickname for Scofield) and "Taco Bell's Canon."



**Tal Wilkenfeld with Scary Goldings
Aug. 6, 2023**

Jon Batiste broke new ground for me while bringing me closer to my 22- and 20-year-old daughters. Batiste is a favorite for them and they were not disappointed, nor was I. The man has more talents than even Newport is typically known for. He brought a big band. He brought a stellar vocalist in DesZ (Desiree Washington). He brought a kick-ass percussion section led by his longtime drummer Joe Saylor and rising star Negah Santos. But mostly, he brought an incredibly powerful ability to connect both with his band and with his audience. Stomping around the stage in his form-fitting red suit and pointing into the audience to raise up the energy ever higher, Batiste commanded a kind of attention and tuning in unusual in even the blues and soul realms.



**Jon Batiste with DesZ (Desiree Washington)
Aug. 5, 2023**

At points during his virtuoso showcase of New Orleans piano styles, from ragtime to stride and beyond, the band members could be seen on the video screen with popping-out eyes at both Batiste's skill and his daring. Earlier, in a kind of dance of asking and offering, Batiste showered the audience with singable, danceable and undoubtedly spiritual offerings, ranging from past hits ("You Are") to one tune from his upcoming album "World Music Radio" album, due August 18th. He brought so much of himself and asked ever more from the listeners: *"Where I come from, they move their bodies ten times faster. I need to see you get free! Get to your inner child. Your Freedom! Your Jazz! Your move that looks ugly but you don't even care about it... No preamble, right now."* He brought the stomp to the audience with his last tune, grabbing a melodica, a small handheld keyboard-and-wind instrument and descending, Pied-Piper-like, into the pulsing throng.

I was in shock that anyone, even Batiste, a New Orleans native, could bring a second-line to Rhode Island and pull it off. Hapless security guards tried to herd the crowd back to give the musicians, still playing and bopping, room to move through the crowd. Meantime, Batiste, ignoring everything but human connection, was literally reaching out

and touching many members of the audience, high-fiving and celebrating in between riffs. The younger members of the band, one of whom, Summer Camargo, 21, is still [a student at Juilliard](#), looked dazed that suddenly their stage band had turned into a marching band. But they all kept marching and hitting the beat, making a big loop through the masses before returning to the stage for applause and good wishes from bandleader and candidate-for-redeemer Batiste. The thrill had not worn off after even the very long trek to the parking lot. A concert for the ages.



Jon Batiste
Aug. 5, 2023

Finally, Samara Joy. This exquisite performer and generational talent, only 23 (!!!), created a new and (indeed) joyful space inside the tent, a tent that it feels like she will both expand and dismantle by the time she is done. Waves of love radiated off the multitudes that had assembled to luxuriate in her ridiculous vocal control, her musing glissandos from her lowest-of-the-low registers to what my daughters were calling “whistle tones,” each perfectly pitched though dizzyingly high. Anyone who had ever tried to sing might be intimidated by hearing Samara Joy at her current peak – a peak that feels destined to ultimately move higher than any singer in the history of jazz, Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan included – but then again, Joy’s singing was so spot-on, so sweetly syncopated, so tonally punctilious, so welcoming to jazz lovers and neophytes alike, that instead of jealousy, it felt like the audience just started basking in

the reflected glory of perfectly held low notes, vocalized shivery blue notes and chill-inducing trips to the upper registers. By the end of her set, when she belted out a couple of her own newly recorded, Grammy-winning near-standards, there was a kind of pulsating, elevating, almost-religious fervor. We did not need Jon Batiste to tell us, as he did in kicking off his inspirational and utterly transporting second-line of a set at the close of Saturday, that “This is not a concert, it is a spiritual experience.” We knew.

- STEVE DICKMAN

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