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John Pizzarelli, Jane Monheit in New London

Jazz Notes

RIFFS

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John Pizzarelli and Jane Monheit, two top contemporary interpreters of



the Great American Songbook, are featured on a strong double-bill tonight at 8 at New London's Garde Arts Center.

Pizzarelli, a triple-threat performer as vocalist, guitarist and amusing, between-songs raconteur, will dip into selections from his latest CD, "Dear Mr. Sinatra" (Telarc International).

Monheit, a dazzling diva who's much at home with both jazz and cabaret material, will, more than likely, serve up samplers from her recent album, "Surrender" (Concord).

On his Telarc homage to Sinatra (one of his prime influences, along with Nat "King" Cole), Pizzarelli flourishes with the assistance of first-rate charts executed by the tight, crisp Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra.

In the Big-Band setting, Pizzarelli presents intelligent, unpretentious interpretations of Sinatra-associated songs ranging from a brassy "Ring-A-Ding Ding" to a mellow "Last Dance."

Pizzarelli avoids the much less-than-tender trap of slavishly imitating the Old Master. Sinatra clones, more often than not, wind up sounding like boorish impersonators, lame wannabes unconsciously paying tribute to Joe Piscopo's kitschy, loathsome lounge singer shtick on "Saturday Night Live" in the 1980s.

For the Garde gig, Pizzarelli performs not with a lush recording studio orchestra, but with his own quartet. Whatever might be lost in sheer quantity from a big ensemble backup is more than compensated for by the quality of Pizzarelli's knack for spontaneous live performance, playing guitar, singing and grooving in a small group format.

In the smaller, pure jazz setting, in fact, you can hear the influence of Sinatra's jazz persona on Pizzarelli's vocal style. Particularly, The Chairman of the Board's uncanny gift for fluid phrasing and relaxed but emphatic delivery.

But there are also elements of Chet Baker, a vocalist who, much like Pizzarelli, had a limited vocal range, yet, despite technical shortcomings, had no problem creating a sense of intimacy by using his jazz feeling for phrasing and warm expressiveness.

Plus, of course, there's a whole lot of life experience going for Pizzarelli, who, as the son of the legendary jazz guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli, grew up in a household where jazz was virtually always in the air.

If there wasn't fine music streaming out of the family stereo, it was probably because the Pizzarelli patriarch was cozily ensconced at home jamming with his pals, the crème de la crème of the Big Apple's finest studio musicians, who just happened to drop by the music-friendly household.

On the same bill at the Garde, Monheit, a song stylist noted for her warm renditions of love ballads, might well tap into her ability to make a vibrant Brazilian undercurrent ripple through her renditions of songs by Henry Mancini, Stevie Wonder and Alan and Marilyn Bergman, among others.

Monheit's guaranteed showstoppers in the past have ranged dramatically from her spellbinding, melancholy rendition of "Over the Rainbow" (forget Judy Garland's teary classic version) to a swinging, cheeky yet chic sprint through Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek."

In the holiday spirit, the singers might even reach into their seasonal song bags and make the evening bright with Christmas cheer.

Monheit's discography includes her holiday-themed album "The Season," which spills over with favorites ranging from "Sleigh Ride" to "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day." As a holiday minstrel, she can wring every emotional drop out of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

Bring a handkerchief or a handy packet of Kleenex just in case you tear up.

In dramatic contrast, Monheit can leap from the height of melancholy to a festive, funny and funky mood, as she does on her much more naughty than nice romp through "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town."

Likewise, Pizzarelli can spread holiday cheer by reaching into his festive CD collection, "Let's Share Christmas."

Tickets: \$32 to \$60. Information: box office, 860-444-7373 and www.gardearts.org. The Garde is at 325 State St., New London.

Hojo tours Torff's turf

Howard "Hojo" Johnson, a celebrated tuba player and baritone saxophonist, is the guest artist with the Fairfield University Jazz Ensemble tonight at 7 and 8:30 at the Quick Center for the Arts on the Fairfield campus.

A former leader of the house band for NBC's "Saturday Night Live," the much sought-after sideman has worked for luminaries ranging from Charles Mingus and Miles Davis to John Lennon and Taj Mahal.

Brian Torff, a noted bassist-composer and Fairfield University's director of jazz and popular music, leads the ensemble in a repertoire ranging from his original works to pieces by Joey Calderazzo and Hank Mobley. The *Fairfield University 5 O'Clock Band* is also featured.

Information: 203-254-4010 and www.quickcenter.com.

Challenging cellist

Cellist-composer *Daniel Levin*, whose challenging music has been hailed by the New York Times as "engagingly experimental," leads his trio Friday at 8:30 and 10 p.m. at New Haven's Firehouse 12. Bassist *Ingebrigt Haker-Flaten* and drummer *Gerald Cleaver* join the New Haven-based artist.

Levin's recent release, "Some Trees" (Hat Hut Records' hatOLOGY label), whose title derives from a poem by the great

American poet John Ashbery, has been praised for its provocative mix of chaos and order and compelling embrace of classical and jazz timbral effects, phrasing and technical approaches to the cello.

Levin is touring in support of his new CD, "Blurry" (HatHut), which was recorded last June both live and in the high-tech studio facilities at Firehouse 12. On the day before the concert, he'll put together a new album, comprised of tracks from the recording studio as well as selections from his performance Friday night.

Firehouse's fine fall season goes out in a blaze of glory Dec. 14 with a performance by the Angelica Sanchez Quintet.

Information: 203-785-0468 and www.firehouse12.com. Firehouse 12 is at 45 Crown St.

Swingin' in the Yuletide

Top-seeded tenor saxophonist *Joel Frahm*

and his quintet help usher in the holiday season Dec. 14 at 8 p.m. at Manchester's Cheney Hall, 177 Hartford Road. The globe-trotting former West Hartford resident recently returned from engagements in Italy. Information: 860-647-9824 and www.cheneyhall.org.

Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra

swing through Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's jazz interpretations of the familiar Tchaikovsky melodies from "The Nutcracker" Dec. 15 at 8 p.m. at Waterbury's Palace Theater. Information: 203-755-4700 and www.palacetheaterct.org.

Life is a cabaret

Vocalist *Audrey Lavine*, a Broadway performer, presents an evening of jazz and cabaret Friday at 7 p.m. in a celebration and benefit at Japanalia Eiko, 990 Farmington Ave., West Hartford.

The event celebrates "Fire," an upcoming, multi-faceted performance piece by *Ann Cubberly* and *Dan Blow* this spring at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art's Aetna Theater. Cubberly is a papier-mache artist, nationally regarded for her creation of puppets and masks. Blow is a designer and co-owner of Japanalia Eiko.

The cabaret bash at Eiko benefits the historic Aetna Theater located in the downtown Hartford museum.

To create a cabaret ambience, the retail venue will be temporarily refashioned for the occasion, complete with appropriate tables, chairs and stage lighting. Lavine, a performer in New York cabaret venues, and her pianist *Ross Patterson* will be joined by Hartford's own, bassist *Seth Lewis*.

General admission, \$35; preferred patron tables of four (beverages included), \$50 a person. Reservations and information: 860-523-7722.

Other notes

Trombonist *Steve Davis*

and friends are among the varied cast of players, both seasoned and young, jamming at regular Monday-night jam sessions at Hartford's Sweet Jane's, 88 Pratt St. On Tuesday nights, the peripatetic Davis and pals rock Piggy's Café, 69 Hawthorn St.

Sam Kimble, Hartford's sagacious swinger of jazz and blues, runs jam sessions every other Monday night (including this coming Monday) at the Elks Club, 171 Bellevue St.

An organ quintet featuring organist *Sammy Myers*, guitarist *Lance James*, *Larry Young* on woodwinds and trumpet, drummer *Timmy LaBelle* and *Graham Ralph* on cocktail drum grooves Wednesday nights at Vibes Uptown, 3155 Main St., Hartford.

Beginning Dec. 16-18, the same lineup, working under the name *Lance James Blues Project*, gambols at Foxwoods Resort Casino's Atrium, with appearances there through March.

Pianist *Alex Nakhimovksy* and bassist *Paul Brown* collaborate Mondays at West Hartford's Simmer Grille, 124 LaSalle Road, and Tuesdays and Wednesdays at Vivo (Crush Lounge) at the Marriott Hartford Downtown, 200 Columbus Blvd., Hartford. On Fridays, in a quartet format, and Saturdays, back as a duo, they're stomping at the capital city's Emperor at the Linden, 10 Capitol Ave.

The *Seizure Jazz Quartet* performs Friday from 5:30 to 8 p.m. at "First Friday" festivities of wine, art and song at the New Britain Museum of American Art, 56 Lexington St., New Britain. Information: 860-229-0257.

Richie DeLorso and his jazz-blues ensemble appear tonight at 7:30 at Szechuan Tokyo, 1245 New Britain Ave., West Hartford. The *Mike Bafundo Quartet* plays there Friday at 8 p.m. Froc and Lorenzo entertain at the restaurant Sunday at 6 p.m. Information: 860-561-0180.

Send jazz information to jazz@courant.com or 860-241-6354.

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