

On the Beat

Thomas Staudter

Roberta Piket: Jazz Appreciation

April is Jazz Appreciation Month, and although a decent stretch of warm temperatures may be absent so far, the swinging celebration of America's Great Musical Idiom continues around the lower Hudson Valley nonetheless.

Jazz fans looking for some enticing hits this week have a few options. Renowned Italian pianist Massimo Faraò leads a quintet at the Jazz Forum on Friday and Saturday night which includes drummer Jimmy Cobb, the last surviving participant on Miles Davis's epochal 1959 recording *Kind of Blue*. Alva Nelson, another pianist known for his work on Broadway and television, brings a quintet with saxophonist Gene Gee into Peekskill's BeanRunner Café on Saturday night.

And if you get your copy of *The Gazette* in time, you may want to check out the soul organ sounds of Paul Connor with drummer Jon Doty and alto saxophonist Baron Raymonde every Thursday night at the Elks Lodge on Croton Avenue in Ossining. Guitarist David Kain leads a trio at the next Ossining Second Saturday Jazz show on April 28.

Across the river, pianist Roberta Piket will be leading a trio with bassist Jay Anderson and drummer Billy Mintz, her husband, at Maureen's Jazz Cellar in Nyack on Saturday night—a great excuse to check out this happening venue.

That's a fair amount of music and solid proof that jazz fans in the Westchester and Rockland county suburbs have it pretty good. When you include the occasional shows at area libraries and church halls, plus the restaurant gigs, opportunities to enjoy the Improviser's Art abound here.

Roberta Piket concurred that the lower Hudson Valley has a worthwhile jazz scene when we spoke on the phone last week. A Brooklynite for many years, Piket moved to Teaneck, New Jersey nine years ago, and although the Jersey suburbs are swarming with jazz musicians, there just aren't that many places to play, she said.

The success of the area's two best venues, Jazz Forum and Maureen's Jazz Cellar, Piket noted, rests on the fact that musicians own and run them—trumpeter / flugelhorn player Mark Morganelli and pianist David Budway, respectively.

"Musicians tend to create places that are respectful to other musicians and where you have a sense that the establishment always has your back," said



Roberta Piket

Piket. "And when you feel comfortable at a gig it always come out in the playing."

Piket added that John Richmond's Monday night jazz jam at the Turning Point Café in Piermont, NY is another great opportunity to hear jazz, as it attracts many of the area's practitioners on a night when most clubs are closed. But as for the northern Jersey suburbs, there are not many places that regular feature jazz other than Shanghai Jazz Restaurant & Bar in Madison, although a few libraries and foundation will host a show here and there.

Right now, Piket is riding high on her new CD, *West Coast Trio*, which features bassist Darek Oleszkiewicz and veteran drummer Joe La Barbera, plus guest spots from guitarist Larry Koonse on two tracks. It is a masterful album, a poignant and engaging reminder of how compelling small group interplay can be, especially when the tunes are well chosen and the instrumentalists are top-notch.

"I first fell in love with jazz piano trio music when I was fourteen and just starting to learn how to play jazz," said Piket. Born and raised in Queens, NY, Her father was composer Frederick Piket, whose works were often performed by the New York Philharmonic. She began piano lessons at the age of seven; her father passed away when she was eight. With two much older brothers, Piket spent a lot of her youth investigating the library of books and records her father left behind while also listening to the Broadway musicals her mother loved to sing and play.

Once she was a student at Hunter

College High School, Piket said she often took side trips to the public library near Lincoln Center where she could read her father's scores. She also discovered the music of Duke Ellington and began to read through his scores, and listen to the classical and jazz records as well.

"I wanted to figure out what I was learning how to play," she said.

Piket's conversion to jazz occurred when she was around 14 and her older brother Joe, also a pianist, brought home Walter Bishop, Jr.'s first album, a piano trio set from 1961 called *Speak Low*, which had been re-released on the Muse label in 1975. Before that, she had been focusing on classical music, playing mostly Bach and Chopin, but the Bishop record changed everything, she said. In fact, Piket and her brother both ended up taking lessons from Bishop for a while.

"I really wanted to expand my chops," said Piket. "My thoughts were becoming more pianistic. I stayed true to the whole lot of modern jazz pianists—I could listen to Bud Powell all day long, and the same is true with Barry Harris. At school, I was studying the whole classical pianistic tradition, but was also catching up on the nearly hundred years of jazz piano tradition. I felt it was mandatory to explore the repertoire of both genres and make use of all the resources I could gather and learn."

Recently, Piket added, she has been focusing on the music of Debussy and Hindemith in the sense that each composer can be, for her, "another resource."

"It is a masterful album, a poignant and engaging reminder of how compelling small group interplay can be... The kind of album that maintains its exhilarating vibe throughout... Close your eyes... and you will be transported back to Bradley's..."

Knowing how inconsistent a career in music can be, Piket studied both computer science and music at Tufts University, but after a year working as a software engineer she got a National Endowment for the Arts grant and began to study jazz in earnest with pianist Riche Beirach, best known for his work with Stan Getz, Chet Baker and Dave Liebman. In time, Piket gained her first major bandstand job with Lionel Hampton and began to build up her reputation in New York's competitive jazz scene. An appearance on Marian McPartland's *Piano Jazz* program on NPR helped establish Piket as a first-call pianist, and soon she was leading her own piano trio as well playing organ in an electric quartet called Alternating Current.

West Coast Trio is Piket's thirteenth CD, and it came about during a visit to hold master classes for the jazz students at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles, where both La Barbera and Oleszkiewicz are on the faculty. After enjoying her time playing together as a trio, Piket decided to collect a bunch of songs she'd always wanted to record and headed to the studio.

Opening with a high-energy Piket original called "Mentor," *West Coast Trio* is the kind of album that maintains its exhilarating vibe throughout. Her tune "A Bridge to Nowhere" is set off by a series of delicate crashes with Koonse on board, and the peppy hard swing of Chick Corea's "Humpty Dumpty" finds Piket in complete control, driving the music with imagination and energy. She brilliantly explores the melody in two-handed fashion on Djavan's "Flor de Lis," and fills John Hicks's "Yemenja" with drama and dark colors. Close your eyes and listen to Piket lead her band mates through the ballad "My Buddy" and you will be transported back to Bradley's, the Greenwich Village "saloon" and the heyday of jazz piano trios a generation ago.

"I like to explore all kinds of music," said Piket. "It's such a big world, why focus on just one thing? But improving, the feel of jazz, swing—for me, that's the greatest."

The Roberta Piket Trio featuring Jay Anderson and Billy Mintz will perform on Saturday, April 21 at Maureen's Jazz Cellar, 2 North Broadway, Nyack, N.Y. Doors open at 6 p.m.; sets are at 8 and 9:30. For more info and reservations, call (845) 535-3143 or visit maureensjazzcellar.com.