



SPRING 2024

JAZZWAY 6004: A GREAT GATHERING, WILL THERE BE MORE?

By
Michael B. Friedman

It was two days before Christmas. The music, a transformation of ordinary holiday songs, was superb. The audience was elegant, warm, and engaged. The food was delicious and plentiful. It was the first post-pandemic concert at Jazzway 6004—a unique jazz venue in a remarkable private home on the edge of Baltimore City.

Hopefully, it was the first of many concerts to come. But, according to the concert organizers (Howard Katz and Marianne Matheny-Katz), that will depend on finding sponsors to underwrite their programs, because admission charges cover less than half the costs of their terrific productions. (If you want to help, contact: Marianne Matheny-Katz at m2katz@comcast.net)

Jazzway History

Jazzway 6004 began in 2007. It provided 6-10 concerts a year, featuring a mix of great musicians from Baltimore and elsewhere--all world-class players. The formidable list includes: Ethel Ennis, Warren Wolf, Sean Jones, Cyrus Chestnut, Tim Warfield, Craig Alston, and many more.

The events were designed to bring the musicians and their audience together, not only by playing in a large living room without a raised stage so that audience and musicians were literally in the same space, but also by providing dinner for the musicians and some listeners before the concert and desert and snacks for everyone afterwards.

"Marianne and Howard welcome guests with warmth People mingle and converse with old acquaintances and new ones, both over drinks or dinner before the concert and with desserts afterwards. It just like being at a fun upscale party," Liz Fixen, editor of the Baltimore Jazz Alliance Newsletter, told me.

Warren Wolf, the master vibraphonist who has been a mainstay of the concerts over the years, describes the concerts as "intimate", and very different from typical jazz venues—clubs, restaurants, or concert halls—offering a special connection between players and the audience.

“Our aim,” Ms. Matheny-Katz told me, “Was to become part of the Baltimore musical landscape and create a community to support local and touring jazz musicians, to preserve the traditions of jazz, to foster its trajectory into the future, and to expand the listening audience for jazz for all ages. This included several small workshops and educational opportunities for both young and older aspiring artists each year.”

Jazzway 2023

The pandemic, of course, brought all of this to an abrupt halt. Now Jazzway is seeking revival, beginning with the terrific concert they held on December 23, 2023. Their living room was packed with 80 people. There was great energy and friendliness both waiting for the concert to begin and sharing dessert after the concert. And during the concert there was an almost palpable connection between the audience and the players.

Tim Warfield, a reeds player, led a group that included Terrell Stafford on trumpet, Warren Wolf on vibes, Cyrus Chestnut on piano, Rodney Whitaker on bass, and Clarence Penn on drums. They were joined by Georgia Heers, a lovely New York-based singer.

The concert was called “Jazzy Christmas”, but it was more than that. Yes, they played holiday tunes, including Santa Claus is Coming to Town, Little Drummer Boy, Let it Snow, Silent Night, God Bless Ye Merry Gentlemen, and—for a bit of religious diversity-- The Dreidel Song. But they didn’t just add a jazzy beat; they transformed all of these songs into jazz compositions of considerable musical depth. The vibes, for example, provided a sense of Christmas bells, but Warren Wolf transcended that. As did Georgia Heers singing Silent Night in a way that created new meaning for an otherwise hackneyed piece of music.

Jazzway’s Future

Howard and Marianne have ambitious hopes for the future of Jazzway. Marianne told me, “Going forward, we hope to restore our series with 6 to 8 concerts a year and to add a streaming option to each concert on a YouTube platform. In addition to streaming, we’ll add musician interviews and features about the atmosphere and food at Jazzway, to give viewers a sense of the experience. We’d like to reach a national audience and convey a positive message about Baltimore by illustrating its vibrant creative community. Possibly there will also be opportunities to participate in or create some small musical festivals in the area. We are also interested in expanding our music education opportunities for both adults and youth—particularly disadvantaged and underserved youth in Baltimore. Finally, we want to actively work with various nonprofits dedicated to improving the quality of life in Baltimore.”

Their overriding goal is, as Andrea Wheeler the vice-president of their board put it, “to keep live music alive in Baltimore.” It is, as Marianne told me, “to

promote a future for jazz that draws from a foundation in jazz tradition but goes beyond. A future that draws, for example, not just from the Great American Songbook but also from the music that has emerged since. A future that insists that jazz has great musical depth and is not just a display of technical brilliance.”

Marianne and Howard added, “Our expanded mission will require sponsors, donors, and grants to help Jazzway continue to evolve and broaden as we move forward.” Hopefully, they will get the support they need.

If you want to help, contact: Marianne Matheny-Katz at m2katz@comcast.net. (Jazzway is a 501C-3 corporation; contributions are tax exempt to the extent permitted by law.)