

Story and photographs by Randy Mallory

All Jazzed Up!

Music, arts, and food harmonize at the Denton Arts & Jazz Festival

For three days in April, the Denton Arts & Jazz Festival turns this jazz town's downtown into a musical merry-go-round.

Nonstop free entertainment keeps jazz fans circling between stages spaced evenly across Denton's 15-acre, shady Civic Center Park. At last year's soirée, I went with the flow, soaked up the groove, and reached for the golden rings.

At one stage--Bling!--I grabbed sublime melodies from Grammy-winning saxophonist Branford Marsalis. At another--Bling!--there were crackerjack tunes from acclaimed saxman and keyboardist Bill Evans. Then--Bling! Bling!--brash big-band arrangements from the University of North Texas' famed One O'Clock Lab Band and soulful charts from blues stalwarts Chris Layton and Tommy Shannon (aka Double Trouble, the late-great Stevie Ray Vaughn's band).

Musical sounds from one stage segued into musical sounds from the next...and not all jazz.

Hypnotic riffs from Venezuelan jazz harpist Carlos Guedes melded into wide-awake licks from West Texas western-swing group, Cowjazz. The pounding urban beat of Dallas rhythm & blues band, Fingerprints, evolved into the thumping Cajun beat of Crawfish, another Dallas group. Strums and stories from singing cowboy Joel Reese of

Nashville followed Texan John Geren's Innate Imagination Marionettes, which followed eclectic renditions from folk-pop duo, Trout Fishing in America.

"People who love jazz also love blues, ethnic, and other kinds of music, so we fill our stages with diverse entertainment," festival director Carol Short explained. "Except for our headliners, we also try to use as many Texas musicians as possible. We believe in it."

I believed in it, too, after checking out the showmanship of two Denton-based favorites.

Pops Carter, a North Texas blues fixture for three decades, mesmerized an attentive audience in his all-blue getup--shirt, suit, and wide-brimmed hat. Backed by a tight group called the Funkmonsters, this 80-something R&B singer belted out lyrics straight from the heart.

At Saturday night's finale, the polka-rock band, Brave Combo, energized an elbow-to-elbow crowd. Down front, teenagers formed a mosh pit. We "grown-ups" relaxed on lawn chairs and blankets under a starry sky. Band founder and lead singer, Carl Finch, , who formed the band 25 years ago in Denton, wrapped all of us around his finger with frenetic polka playing and hilarious onstage antics. He even coaxed us onto our feet for a giant, communal hokey-pokey.

Brave Combo returns to the 2004 Denton Arts & Jazz Festival, April 23-25, joining other headliners--the legendary Cuban jazz trumpeter, Arturo Sandoval, and Chicago blues guitar giant, Buddy Guy, backed for the first time by Double Trouble.

As home of the respected University of North Texas music program, Denton has long been a jazzed-up town.

In 1947 what's now UNT offered America's first bachelor's degree in jazz studies and later added master's and doctoral degrees. One of UNT's nine jazz lab bands--the One O'Clock Lab Band, so-named for its practice hour--tours nationally and internationally and has produced dozens of big-band jazz recordings. In the mid-1970s, two of the group's annual albums received Grammy nominations, making it the first student band so honored.

Denton's jazz festival emerged from that rich jazz education system, says Ray Hair, an alumnus and former teacher at UNT. Ray is a professional drummer and president of the Dallas-Fort Worth Professional Musicians Association, which helps book the festival's performers. "Most of our acts, even the big names, have a connection to Denton. That makes the event special, because we showcase talent that matured musically here."

In 1985 the city of Denton and the DFW Musicians Association co-sponsored the first Denton Jazz Fest, a one-day celebration staged on the back of a flatbed trailer. In 1991 the event merged with Spring Fling, Denton's arts festival, to form the Denton Arts & Jazz Festival.

Today, the Denton Festival Foundation produces the event in cooperation with the city and the musicians association, plus individual and corporate sponsors. Proceeds fund local arts and preservation projects.

Each year, approximately 150,000 festival-goers hear 1,300 performers play on six stages--three for professionals and three for community and school groups. Visitors

peruse juried arts and crafts at 140 indoor and outdoor booths, and munch on varied foods from 40 vendors. Kids make their own art in the Children's Art Tent. There are even roving entertainers such as clowns, mimes, dulcimer players, jugglers, folk dancers, and ragtime and folk musicians.

Denton band, Little Jack Melody & The Young Turks, oozed original, neo-cabaret jazz songs near a craft booth which caught my eye.

Sculptures of stray-haired trumpeters, drummers, and saxophonists--made from bent steel reinforcing rods (rebar)--stood in a whimsical array. San Antonio artist Don Drake (himself a jazz trumpeter for 40-plus years) bends 90 percent of his rebar-art into musical themes. "At Denton I can pick up commissions for my art and also get to be around all these fine musicians. That's unusual, since not many jazz fests have arts and crafts."

Others artists I met agreed that jazz and art blend harmoniously here.

Inside the Civic Center I chatted with Lorena artist Jerry Allen Brem. His bold, western-themed oil paintings feature faceless black-and-white cows, horses washed in brown and maroon, and giant gray six-shooters. "This show gets a more sophisticated crowd because Denton is a college town. Even if people are just looking, I still have good conversations about my art."

At a nearby booth, visitors chatted about the comically surreal paintings of Arkansas artist Richard Frideaux and the "retro-punk-Deco-cowboy" ceramics of his wife, Kay Hays Bynum. "Lots of people who come to music festivals are younger and less able to buy art," Richard said. "But we think exposing them to art helps create the

next generation of artists and patrons." (Richard and Kay also demonstrate their art at local schools while in Denton for the festival.) "Besides, it's more fun having music and art together."

Ditto for having music and *food* together, Richard Blair of Plano told me as he served up a steaming New York-style chili hotdog. You can't miss him. His stand is the one with the blow-up figures of movie characters, Spider-Man and Yoda.

"The replicas pull in the kids, the adults smell the food, and the rest is history," Richard said. "Eat and listen. Eat and listen. This is a great festival for both."

Indeed, music, art, and food are near at hand wherever folks spread out on blankets and lawn chairs across the park.

One large group boasted 30 or more people relaxed on blankets and camping chairs within easy earshot of the main jazz stage.

Will and Ann May set up camp here at every Denton Arts & Jazz Festival. Their loyalty comes naturally. A former dean of UNT's music school, Will now fills that role at Baylor University's School of Music in Waco. The Denton festival has become an annual reunion for the May family and friends.

"We get here hideously early to get the same spot each year," Will said, as Ann passed around her fried chicken, deviled eggs, and potato salad. "We've found it to be a great family time and a time to see old friends in a relaxed fun atmosphere."

As Dallas saxophonist Joseph Vincelli cranked out a hot solo under colored stage lights, Will added another reason, with which jazz fans everywhere can agree: "We also love seeing and hearing live musicians working--working at what they deeply love and to which they are deeply dedicated--music."

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RESOURCES

Carol Short, festival director

Ray Hair, DFW Musicians Union

Dr. William May; Dean of the School of Music Baylor University

Jerry Allen Brem, artist

Richard Frideaux, artist

Don Drake, artist

Richard Blair, food vendor

Web:

Re: UNT Jazz

--<http://www.music.unt.edu/jazz/proghistory.html>

--<http://web2.unt.edu/news/story.cfm?story=7225L>