

## UMBRIA JAZZ 2000

A review by JazzChord editor Eric Myers\*

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*Keith Jarrett photographed during the sound-check at Umbria Jazz: a clause in his contract stipulates that he will not perform if the temperature is below 19 degrees centigrade...PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE*

I've attended only a handful of the world's great international jazz festivals, (Berlin Jazzfest, Bombay's Jazz Yatra, Montreal International, Wangaratta, Kool Jazz Festival in NY) so I'm by no means qualified to rank them. But, over the years, a number of globetrotters have pointed to Umbria Jazz as the world's finest jazz festival.

Jim McLeod has been there for six years in a row, and won't miss it. In July 2000, I discovered for myself what the fuss has been all about. And, let's not mess around with qualifications; Umbria Jazz is a truly splendid festival, and I'll try to explain why.

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*\*JazzChord editor Eric Myers travelled to Italy in 2000 at his own expense. From July 14-23, 2000, he was in Perugia as a guest of Umbria Jazz, which many enthusiasts regard as the finest jazz festival in the world. This article appeared in the Oct/Nov 2000 edition of JazzChord.*

First, the sound at the various ticketed venues was uniformly excellent, and mostly superb. Jazz, perhaps more than any other form of music, is a music of the mind, and depends mostly on sound (rather than, say, visual effects) so this is a not inconsiderable matter. At the Giardini del Frontone, the open-air venue where several big-name artists played to audiences of over 4,000 people, the sound quality was stunning, courtesy of the festival's sound supremo, Gianni Grassilli. From Bologna, Grassilli is one of the finest sound technicians in the world today, with an unrivalled knowledge of the music, and how it is meant to sound to the aficionado's ear.

Second, the quality of the artistic program, a massive one, was unrivalled. Here, I can only mention some of the concerts which were highlights of the festival for me. But they are only a small percentage of what I enjoyed immensely over ten days of wall-to-wall music.

If you wish to know more, have a look at Umbria Jazz's excellent website [www.umbriajazz.com](http://www.umbriajazz.com). Not only was there an outstanding ticketed program in five venues, but also four or five outdoor stages in the main piazzas, where a diverse range of African American music was presented, free to the people. These stages featured groups such as Bobby Jones and the Nashville Super Choir ( a gospel group), the Olympia Brass Band of New Orleans, the Ray Gelato Jazz Giants (UK), the Berklee Group directed by Bill Pierce (student band from Berklee School of Music, Boston), the Johnny Nocturne Band featuring Kim Nalley, the Elfa Singers of Indonesia, and many others. It was primarily these free concerts which brought 20,000 people a day in to Perugia, enabling them to eat, drink and party far into the wee hours in the streets of this lovely medieval town. Some 200,000 people attended, making Umbria Jazz Perugia's premier cultural event of the year.

Third, knowing the value of press and magazine coverage, Umbria treats jazz writers extremely well (accommodation and meals are provided for the press contingent). Some journalists are actually flown to Rome, and then transported to Perugia, at the festival's expense. In Perugia itself there is a smoothly professional press office, where interviews with artists and administrators are arranged on request, and tickets issued every day to the press individually, to ensure that they can be seated conveniently at those concerts they select.

The festival opened on July 13 with the US singer Natalie Cole and her big band. This was a black tie affair in the lovely old Teatro Morlacchi, one of the festival's main venues. I was seated in a small private box five levels up, virtually overlooking Natalie, who provided a smooth cabaret experience. Feeling like I was in the film *Dangerous Liaisons*, I could see the lyrics to her songs taped to the floor. My box seated three people, and I was joined by the Italian critic Guiseppe Ballaris, who lives in New York and writes for various Italian jazz magazines.

July 14 saw the Buena Vista Social Club band, and the Cuban All Stars, in an exciting open air concert in the Giardini del Frontone. These bands of mainly elderly Cubans

played wonderful, warm, accessible Afro-Cuban music, full of melody, and subtle, complicated rhythmic cross currents. The pianist Ruben Gonzalez (now 80) was a revelation, and often his piano solos sounded like a cascading waterfall, pouring into the night air. Where the press were seated for this concert - a long way from the stage — the sound was sensational. So, although the musicians were something of a blur, I felt very close to the music. The Italian audience danced in the aisles.

Then, round midnight, up to the BMW Jazz Club in the Hotel La Rosetta, where the Eric Reed Trio, plus Donald Harrison (alto saxophone) and the singer Mary Stallings (whom I believe toured Australia with the Basie band in the 60s) played most nights. This was acoustic music in a small jazz club that seated about 50 people — still perhaps the best place to hear jazz - an alternative to the open-air extravaganza. Jim McLeod and I sat at a table near the band, so could experience the intimacy of this sort of music. Harrison was a wonder, Stallings was just beautiful, and Reed played



*The American singer Mary Stallings: just beautiful...*

extremely well. Reed must have been coasting at Wangaratta in 1999, where he was unimpressive with the Vincent Herring Quartet. The other after-hours club which started at midnight each night, Il Contrappunto, featured a quartet led by the irrepressible New York vibraphonist Joe Locke, with David Hazeltine (piano), Essiet Essiet (bass), and Tony Reedus (drums).



*L-R, Keith Jarrett, Jack DeJohnette, Gary Peacock...*

One of my great regrets is never having heard the Bill Evans Trio live, so I'm relieved that I won't have to say the same about the great Keith Jarrett Trio. Jarrett, Gary Peacock (bass) and Jack DeJohnette (drums) performed on July 15 in the Giardini del Frontone, but it was touch and go. Booked to do only five concerts on his European tour, Jarrett flew in a private jet from his headquarters in Nice, France, to Perugia, for the trio's only concert in Italy. He flew back to Nice afterwards, I'm told, so as not to have to change beds. Arriving at the festival venue late afternoon in the pouring rain (the weather was unusually cold in Perugia for this time of year) he attended a short sound-check, and then cancelled the concert. (There is apparently a clause in Jarrett's contract stipulating that he will not perform if the temperature is below 19 degrees centigrade). He then dined at the popular Perugian restaurant La Taverna and, according to the American writer Mitchell Feldman, emerged "to the sight of the Umbrian sun setting slowly in the West". He reconsidered and, after consulting with Peacock and DeJohnette, agreed to perform (with heaters on the stage, and spotlights to maximise warmth).

This was only Jarrett's second concert in 2000 (he had sold out New York's Carnegie Hall in May), and he delivered a wonderful set of standards which commenced with *Gettin' Sentimental Over You*. The sound resonating in the Umbrian night air captured all the intimacy of the acoustic trio. It was not loud, but clear as a bell and, with the subtle interactions between the three musicians in the air, I felt I was listening to the trio in my own living room. After 70 minutes they left the stage, and responded to a standing ovation with two encores: a rocking *Poinciana*, and a lovely, gentle version of *When I Fall In Love*.



*Wynton Marsalis (front line, fifth from the left) with members of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra: he was routinely bagged by the critics as an assiduous self-promoter... PHOTO CREDIT JOHN ABBOTT*

Wynton Marsalis and the members of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra were a major presence for some days at the festival. Marsalis effortlessly dominated the agenda, deflecting questions about the Lincoln Center Project's "conservatism" at a press conference; hosting the Louis Armstrong Centenary Film Program; participating in a forum on the impact of Dizzy Gillespie, along with John Lewis, James Moody and Rob Gibson; displaying an awesome command of historic jazz trumpet styles in a lovely duo set with the 80-year-old pianist John Lewis; and leading the Lincoln Center orchestra in its *Sound Of The Century* concert, with James Moody as special guest. As always, Marsalis impressed with the beauty of his playing and composing, handled all his speaking jobs with humility and engaging humour, and was routinely bagged by the critics as an assiduous self-promoter.



*John Lewis (left) & Wynton Marsalis, following their duo performance at Umbria Jazz... PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE*

The Chicago singer Patricia Barber's performances at Teatro Pavone were a highlight. The Pavone was renamed the Blue Note Theatre, where artists from that prestigious label were presented. Everyone agreed that Barber was an original. She illustrated one of the great joys of Umbria: that many artists give multi-performances, so that one can return to hear them performing again, to get inside their music. I attended Barber's first concert, and she opened with a terrific version of Paul McCartney's *Blackbird* (she also does a haunting version of Lennon's *Norwegian Wood*) and she finally repeated *Blackbird*, much to my delight. She's a fine, minimalist pianist and in live performance opens out much more on the piano than she did on her celebrated CD *Modern Cool*.



*Patricia Barber: an original...*

In some ways Barber is the intellectual's jazz singer. One has to take seriously a woman who can write a tune like *Postmodern Blues*, and sing *She's A Lady* without amending the words used by Tom Jones in his version. She told an interviewer that she's so nervous in concert that she cannot speak to the audience until after three or four numbers. She sips cognac throughout (sometimes alternating with tea) and, overall, is a dark and brooding jazz musician. I couldn't imagine her performing in daylight, only in the jazz club late at night. A promoter with vision should bring her to Australia.



*The saxophone section of the Monk Tentet All Stars, L-R, Howard Johnson, Harold Land, Johnny Griffin, Steve Lacy and, far right, a very glum Phil Woods. The trumpeters Bill Walrath (left) and Don Sickler are just visible in the row behind...*  
*PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE*

For many people the high point of the festival was the sole performance of the Monk Tentet All Stars, led by the American trumpeter Don Sickler, with guest Johnny Griffin (tenor sax). The saxophone section, dripping with distinction, included Phil Woods (alto), Steve Lacy (soprano), Griffin, Harold Land (tenor) and Howard Johnson (baritone, bass clarinet). A fine rhythm section included Ron Matthews (piano), David Williams (bass) and the lovely drummer Billy Higgins. The group was completed by Jack Walrath (trumpet) and Eddie Bert (trombone).

On a European tour, this group began at midnight on July 20 at the Morlacchi. Mysteriously, Phil Woods failed to play a solo during the whole performance, leaving his fans in the sold-out theatre deeply disappointed, and sending the critics into a frenzy of speculation as to why. The best theory, amongst the gossip, was that Woods was upset at the differential between the fee he was receiving for the tour, and the fee paid to Griffin, who had been added to the Tentet by the festival organisers.



*Phil Woods was apparently upset at the differential between the fee he was receiving for the tour, and the fee paid to Johnny Griffin (pictured above)...*

There were so many other highlights. The double bill of Cuban Blue Note artists at the Giardini del Frontone, was a marvellous evening of exciting Cuban jazz, opening with the astonishingly adventurous pianist Gonzalo Rubelcaba and his trio. He was followed by the doyen of Cuban jazz, the inimitable pianist Chucho Valdes and his quartet. I wonder what they put in mothers' milk in Cuba.

One evening at the Frontone, the support act was the Roy Haynes Quartet, followed by the Michael Brecker-Pat Metheny Quartet. I quickly realised why Brecker has had such an influence on so many young tenorists. The Steffon Harris Jacky Terrasson Quartet played at the Blue Note Theatre, where the Charlie Hunter Trio, and later

Kurt Elling, performed. The Tribute to Milt Jackson was a warmhearted affair, featuring Gary Burton & Joe Locke (vibraphones), Dave Holland (bass), James Moody, and others.

Speaking of Holland and Moody, they were awarded honorary doctorates by Berklee School of Music at a moving ceremony held in a lovely historic Perugian location Sala Dei Notan. Holland spoke at length, but Moody was speechless: he declared his love for his wife (who was present) and then broke into his famous *Moody's Mood for Love*, with slightly amended lyrics to suit the occasion.



*The saxophonist James Moody: an honorary doctorate awarded to him in a moving ceremony in Perugia...PHOTO CREDIT GIANCARLO BELFIORE*

Did I tell you about the Latin & Brazil Night at the Frontone? Or the Vento and Si Viaggiare musical projects, featuring the superb Enrico Rava and his group, plus a big band and a symphony orchestra? This was broadcast live throughout Italy. I should have mentioned the Steve Turre Quartet, the Roy Hargrove Quintet, the Larry Willis Trio, Al Jarreau, or the singer Antonia Bennett (Tony's daughter), who fronted an excellent trio.

Umbria Jazz is the big-time, but with all the care and attention to detail that are so often absent at large festivals. My congratulations to the director Carlo Pagnotta for building Umbria Jazz into such a magnificent event.