



Youth movement reigniting San Diego Dixieland Jazz Festival

Thanks in part to 20-something musicians, and swing dancers, the 33-year-old event's audience is skewing younger

By George Varga

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There's a very sound reason that saxophonist/clarinetist **Chloe Feoranzo** and pianist **Stephanie Trick** *didn't* perform at the first edition of the **San Diego Thanksgiving Dixieland Jazz Festival**: Neither of them was alive when this annual music marathon debuted here 33 years ago as a celebration of a musical style whose roots date back to the early 20th century, if not before.

But Feoranzo, 20, and Trick, 26, are now veterans of the festival, with Trick returning for her second year and Feoranzo — improbably, given her young age — for her seventh. They are both audience favorites who performed together last year and are likely to do so again here this week. Both impress equally with their instrumental skills and their infectious enthusiasm for music that, in some instances, predates their births by 70 or more years.

“I was 14 the first time I played at the festival, and I loved it,” said Feoranzo, a former student at the San Diego School of Creative and Performing Arts. She has one solo album to her credit and is now in her junior year as a music performance major at Webster University in St. Louis.

“Seeing the music performed live at the festival when I was 13 is what brought me into playing old (styles of) jazz,” Feoranzo continued. “There's something about the music that is very happy, that grabs you and makes you want to dance. You can hop from venue to venue at the festival and pick a dance partner in each one. Thanksgiving wouldn't be the same for me without the festival.”

Trick, who coincidentally is a St. Louis native and has six (soon to be seven) albums to her credit, is similarly effusive.

Like Feoranzo, she is scheduled to perform multiple times at the festival, be it solo, in a duo or sitting in and jamming with various bands. On Friday night, she and singer Lorraine Feather (the daughter of legendary jazz critic and sometime composer Leonard Feather) will perform music from the debut album of their duo, **Nouveau Stride**.

“The thing that drew me to this music is that it’s happy and really high-energy,” Trick said, speaking from a recent concert tour stop in San Francisco.

“Even if you don’t know anything about jazz, or music in general, there’s something really intrinsic that draws you into this. If I could like this music when I was 20, I don’t see why other people who are 20 won’t like it. The rhythms are really infectious and everything is improvised, so there’s a lot of spontaneity. There’s a lot here that younger people can latch on to.”

At its peak in the 1980s and 1990s, the San Diego Thanksgiving Dixieland Jazz Festival drew more than 10,000 people annually, the majority in their 50s or older. That attendance figure has held steady around 6,000 in recent years.

Old meets young

Yet, while the median age of attendees is still a bit past the half-century mark, it is gradually dropping. Part of the credit goes to fresh-faced musicians like Feoranzo, who plays bebop and swing as adeptly as she does Dixieland, and Trick, who specializes in stride and boogie-woogie piano traditions.

Then there are swing-dance fans, many in their 20s and 30s, who have discovered that the festival is a great place to cut a rug (to use a phrase favored by veteran jitterbug and Lindy Hop dancers). Another factor for the festival’s broadening appeal is that it now embraces other styles, from rockabilly and ragtime to the rollicking New Orleans marching brass band tradition played by San Diego’s **Euphoria Brass Band**.

“Ten years ago, I would have said Chloe and Stephanie were exceptions at our festival, but not now,” said Bill Adams, 46, head of America’s Finest City Dixieland Jazz Society, under whose auspices the festival is presented.

“We also have young groups playing almost every year, like the Red Skunk Band and **The (Mission Bay) Preservationists**, whose members are students at Mission Bay High School.”

Known until last year as the Mission Bay High School Dixie Jazz Band, The Preservationists is a 12-piece band that features three young women and nine young men. To the casual observer, they might seem unlikely champions of a music that dates back to when their grandparents, or even great-grandparents, were kids themselves.

But The Preservationists perform at festivals across the state and beyond. And the group is accomplished enough to have this year earned an invitation to perform in New Orleans with the legendary Preservation Hall Jazz Band. By doing so, they join an elite group of San Diego-bred musicians to achieve that rare distinction (Hilltop High School grad **Tom**

Waits is another).

Jean-Paul "J.P." Balmat, the director of The Preservationists, is a 2002 graduate of Mission Bay High School. During his years as a student there he was a member of The Preservationists, whose previous director, Ray Vinole, is one of Southern California's top Dixieland trumpeters and for years headed the school's music department. Vinole launched the Mission Bay High School Dixie Jazz Band, as it was then known, specifically to perform at the San Diego Thanksgiving Dixieland Jazz Festival.

The Holiday Bowl connection

Festival honcho Adams is a second-generation San Diego Thanksgiving Dixieland Jazz Festival organizer. His late father, Alan, an avid tuba and trombone player, was instrumental in getting the festival off the ground here in the 1980s, when it was launched in conjunction with the annual Holiday Bowl college football game.

As a kid who attended the festival each year, Adams was struck by "watching thousands of people who are the age I am now, or older, enjoying jazz." He credits the festival's artist-friendly approach as a key to its longevity.

"We've always been a musician's festival," Adams said. "A lot of festivals cater to just what the fans want. Musicians enjoy playing for us because we work around their schedules and let them build different (performance) themes. My father said that it just turned out that way because a lot of us involved with (putting on) the festival are musicians."

Now, slowly but surely, a new generation of forward-looking musicians is making its presence felt. Feoranzo and Trick, who are steeped in the music's traditions but also look beyond them, are two prime examples.

"It's amazing to watch Chloe and Stephanie onstage and how they take a piece of music and dig down deep and play it so well and so expressively," Adams said.

"It's gotten to the point where I now ask Chloe for musical recommendations, even though she's only 20, because she knows jazz so well. It's the same with Stephanie, who's not just a great pianist, but a historian of the music."

Adams chuckled as he recalled Feoranzo's festival debut in 2006, when she was a junior high school student.

"Her mother called to ask if Chloe could sit in, so we got her up onstage with a few bands and she stunned everybody," Adams said. "This cute, little girl, with big eyes, picked up her tenor saxophone and played so well that people were saying: 'Wait a minute! Where she'd learn to do that?' Before the end of that weekend, we arranged for Chloe to come back and play the next year. She was a tremendous gem.

"And Stephanie is absolutely incredible. I know this because, when she's performing, other pianists playing at the festival will come and sit in the audience to watch her. And

these are pianists who are two or three times her age.”

Feoranzo began playing jazz here when she was 9, after hearing saxophonist **Chris Klich** perform with the swing-fueled band Big Time Operator.

In 2006, she attended the annual UC San Diego Jazz Camp for the first time and later began studying privately with internationally acclaimed sax great **Charles McPherson**. But the allure of the San Diego Thanksgiving Dixieland Jazz Festival goes beyond the music for Feoranzo.

“The great thing about Dixieland is that people just accept you,” she said. “As a result of my playing at the San Diego festival, I’ve played at Dixieland festivals in Sacramento, Indiana and Florida, usually as a guest soloist. It’s a great event. People dress up and it’s a place to go out and have fun. But it’s nothing too fancy-schmancy.”

Trick started classical piano lessons when she was 5. At 13, she began playing ragtime pieces by Scott Joplin. At 17, her teacher introduced her to the music of stride piano pioneer James P. Johnson, whose ebullient playing was a key influence on such jazz greats as Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Fats Waller. It was love at first listen.

“I haven’t seen a lot of young women interested in playing stride piano, but it’s never been an issue,” Trick said.

“I didn’t get into this because there were no women playing it, or because there were. I got into it because I liked the music so much. If it’s only 60-year-old men playing this music, it doesn’t matter to me, because I would do this regardless.”

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