

Packet Magazine

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SCATTIN' WITH
JAZZ SINGER
SUE GILES

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by sarah firshein • photo by frank wojciechowski

SCATTIN' IN THE KEY OF COOL

Sue Giles jazzes up the music scene in Central Jersey

YOU might say vocalist Sue Giles' appreciation for jazz is steeped in one of the music's most distinguished blunders: a 1960 Ella Fitzgerald recording when The First Lady of Song herself forgot the lyrics to the standard "Mack the Knife."

Just remember, Ms. Giles points out, "she still finishes the song, goes right into 'How High the Moon' and then loses herself in a long scat."

"If we think of singing a song like our desire to really be understood — that's kind of what she's doing. I really like to think of music in terms of a conversation," she adds. And then, as if to prove her point, Ms. Giles launches into Ella's now-famous scat lines, each dulcet note piercing the static air like a honey-dipped knife.

Yet, Ms. Giles, a Queens, NY, native who lived in Brooklyn before settling in Hamilton in 2005, doesn't particularly care that she's stunned this writer into silence — or that the crowd she draws to the Salt Creek Grille in Princeton Forrestal Village is less concerned with flirtations than with her voice emanating from the corner of the bar.

"My whole goal as a musician is not to sing because of myself. I really want to save the genre of jazz in this country," she says. "I don't want the legacy of music that was created here — in this country — to be so under-served."

Ms. Giles works part time as the school director of the Trenton Community Music School, an open-enrollment non-profit that offers private and group music lessons for area children and adults. "When you incorporate music and you're teaching children, they have an appreciation for things like sunsets and sunrises and the arts," she says.

And when Ms. Giles gigs around the area, she often invites high-school students looking for their footing within the jazz community to join her onstage. "When a 15-year-old gets up on stage and plays, other 15-year-olds take notice. That is what we want," she says. "We are all listening to each other, and we are all in tune with each other. These younger guys are the ones who are going to be carrying the torch."

As for why it's so important to expose young people to jazz even in this "electronic age," Ms. Giles says it's simply a matter of returning to that Ella recording — which she says she has listened to 50,000 times — and learning from it.

"The thing about jazz is that it defies convention," she says. "The structure of the chords is such that it allows for a free interpretation of a previous work in such a way that it creates new work."

"When you have the vision to buck the trend and not stick to what people are going to buy or what will be commercially acceptable," she adds, "it's very possible to re-light the fire under what makes this genre so fun, unpredictable and creative." ●

For more information on Ms. Giles' upcoming gigs at the Salt Creek Grille, or to purchase her new CD "Trav'lin" (2008, Giles Jazz), visit sugiles.com. For more information on the Trenton Community Music School, visit tcmusicschool.com. To sample her work for free, visit packetonline.com/suegiles/.



Hamilton resident and Trenton Community Music School director Sue Giles jams at the Salt Creek Grille in Princeton Forrestal Village. Ms. Giles, a New York City native, cites the legendary Ella Fitzgerald as one of her dominant musical influences. "The thing that struck me about Ella Fitzgerald when I was really, really young is that she always sounded like she was singing with a smile," she says. "She sings with a smile even when she's singing a sad, lonely, I'm-missing-you song."