

## 2006 Art Tatum Jazz Heritage Festival

By Geneva J. Chapman,  
Sojourner's Truth Reporter



"I'm from New Orleans - Laissez les bons temps rouler, let the good times roll!" exclaimed WTOL-Channel 11 reporter Shelly Brown, opening this year's Art Tatum Jazz Heritage Festival, Saturday, June 17, 2006, at International Park, as she introduced none other than Johnny O'Neal, the jazz pianist who portrayed Toledo's own Art Tatum in the movie *Ray*.

Recommended for the role by Oscar Peterson, the Detroit native experienced a surge in his career following the movie when he was given the opportunity to play piano in The Ray Charles Band's 2005 world tour.

"That was a real honor for me and for Toledo audiences, to play the part of Tatum – one of the greatest pianists ever," said O'Neal. He will also star in a second feature film, *Shouting the Blues*, soon.

O'Neal played Tatum's music live in *Ray*, taking on the momentous task of trying to re-create music that was inimitable. However, he rose to the challenge and those attending this year's jazz festival got to see him do it again, live and in living color.

His dexterity on the keyboard was a tribute to his film namesake and the *raison d'être* for Toledo's festival. The music practically leaped off the keys, cooling off the hot, humid air just a little with its rollicking rhythms that kept the small audience that braved the heat to catch the start of this year's festival reeling.

Then Johnny started singing, revealing another aspect of his multi-faceted talent and yet another reason to love his music. Reminiscent of the late Bobby Short, Johnny O'Neal took a hundred or so Toledoans on a short, spiritual journey to New York's Carlisle Hotel to hang out for a minute at the Café Carlisle where Short played night after night for three decades until his death a little over a year ago.

The brief cooling off was abbreviated when O'Neal's sexy voice heated things up as he belted out a hot ballad that had perspiring ladies glowing as the jazz man's seductive voice matched each sweet caress of 88 pliant piano keys note for note and stroke for stroke, turning cool breezes hot again. Swooning, fanning and hiding under umbrellas praised beneath the swaying fronds of the park's popular weeping willow, under which most of the early audience for the festival crowded avoiding the scoring rays of the sun, bare shoulders glistened, moist lips parted to sigh and hot bodies moved to the rhythm of jazz.



*Hendricks and proteges*

No wonder they call it 'jazz,' originally 'jass': word that once meant – well, let's just say something very sexual, primordial and hot.

Hot jazz blew through the branches of that sheltering tree, turning the cool have warm – but not for long. Soon O'Neal, parched himself from his own sizzling serenade, brought back the cool as he ran his nimble fingers up and down the keyboard, creating a draft.

Its coolness drifted out across the park, bringing relief and musical release to all who listened. Having effectively lowered the temperature, O'Neal took advantage of the chilly air to blues things up a bit, still keeping it cool with some 'Satchmo-like' scat singing.

"Homeboy," he sang, "you keep running your big mouth – don't know what the hell you talkin' about." The crowd pleaser ended his set and went on to his next gig in Memphis, leaving Toledo all the better for his short sojourn here.

Earlier, honor students from high schools in six counties performed in a jazz ensemble that showed each one of them has the promise of being a great jazz musician.

Meanwhile, students from the Toledo School of the Arts promoted art by showcasing The Toledo Jazz Society's 2006 jazz festival posters and t-shirts.

Students from the school performing in the Afro-Caribbean group, Hajera, also performed between acts, doing authentic African dance and drumming in festive African-inspired costumes.

“How many of you love jazz?” asked WNWO-Channel 24 morning anchor Shenikwa Stratford. “How many of you love jazz teachers – the people who teach jazz?” Stratford also asked.

Proving false the old adage, ‘those who can, do; those who can’t, teach,’ the quartet of professors headed by director of Jazz Studies in the music department at The University of Toledo, Gunnar Mossblad, performed contemporary jazz standards and original jazz compositions in a ‘hard, swingin’ bebop style.’

Joining Mossblad’s sax were Scott Gwinnell on piano, Norm Damschroder on bass and Michael Waldrop on the drums.

Meanwhile, in the Kids’ Jazz tent, students from TSA performed in a jazz ensemble, which rivaled many of the professional artists in the quality and technicality of the music.

Other artists from the school provided free face painting for the kids in a special tent nearby. Debbie Taylor, from The University of Michigan, read aloud from her children’s book “Sweet Music In Harlem,” late Saturday afternoon, recalling those lazy summer days, sitting on Grandma’s porch listening to her spend delightful yarns that stimulated young imaginations, taking us off to far off places.

Well, Harlem isn’t that far off, but you get the idea.

The Toledo Jazz Orchestra’s Big Band tribute to Charlie ‘Chazz’ Mewhort, put things into full swing a few hours before sunset as more and more people filled the park. Chazz, a lifelong resident of Toledo for most of his life, died at the end of last year. The well-known drummer was deeply involved with the Toledo Jazz Society, having served as president of TJS’s board of directors; hosting a weekly radio program, “Jazz Perspectives,” for many years and visiting schools every week to introduce elementary and secondary students to jazz.

Everyone performing in the orchestra at this year’s festival was amazing, but pianist Eric Dickey received the biggest ovation with his easy handling of the keyboard.

As the sun spiraled down toward the horizon, a new sound was heard in International Park. It was none other than the blues, which sprang from the same roots as jazz, both of which were created by African-Americans from the African rhythms from which first sprang ‘spirituals’ or ‘anthems’ and gospel music in this country.

A tribute to Art Griswold, the late brother of Roman Griswold and the other half of The Griswolds, The Blue Suit Blues Review, took center stage with local legends like blues



*Jon and Aria Hendricks*



*Jarreau and Hendricks*

guitarist 'Big Blues Bob' Michaels, Ron 'Crawdaddy' Crawford, Voodoo Libido and, of course, Roman.

Anchors of The Griswolds, the house band at the Hines Farm in Swanton, Ohio, Art and Roman moved to Toledo in the late 1950's. According to "Jazz Notes," the newsletter for The Toledo Jazz Society, "Art's superior guitar talents were accentuated by his ability to play crisp notes and fast runs while holding the guitar between his legs or behind his back. Roman's loose and lanky movements and rolling hands on the keyboard were matched only by his high falsetto voice."

Excitement ripped through the festival audience as each local blues artist performed, reaching a fever pitch when the surviving Griswold, Roman sang in his sweet, honey-dripping falsetto, setting women's hearts aflutter, old and young, black and white, married and single.

Just before dusk, organist Joey DeFrancesco hit his Hammond B-3 and boaters drifting slowly across the Maumee River ventured closer to the eastern docks, curious about the celestial sound that reverberated all over downtown Toledo like the bells of some pristine chapel. But it wasn't bells ringing, it was that organ singing as DeFrancesco hammered away on the Hammond B-3 making sweet, sweet music.

The park, now over half full, seemed to welcome late arrivals with open arms, offering cool retreat from the heat of the day as the shady areas widened to include nearly the entire space.

Enthusiastic applause, cheers, yells and whistles followed The Joey DeFrancesco Trio's first number, Ray Charles' "I Got a Woman." Then they got their mojo working by working their musical magic on several hundred jazz lovers sitting on folding chairs in a park listening to music one usually hears in a concert hall or jazz club. More applause, cheers, yells and whistles followed the trio's finale as they took their leave for another gig in Philadelphia.



*Damen Cook*

Roomful of Blues described by Count Basie as "the hottest blues band" he ever heard definitely passed that litmus test at this year's jazz festival. Eliciting cheers and catcalls shortly after starting their first number, the eight-member group more than lived up to their reputation and recommendation from jazz great Basie who called Art Tatum "the eighth wonder of the world," proving his good judgment and excellent taste.

An orange sunset provided amber lighting to background the warm sounds of funky blues that enveloped International Park and all who inhabited it Saturday at dusk.

Boats that drifted along the Maumee before sped up, drawing even closer to the bluesy sounds of a band that set Toledo's downtown afire in the orangy amber glow of a late day sun that similarly set the sky afire.

Tom-tom drums, big brass and electric vocal revved things up as the largest audience of the day enjoyed every kind of blues imaginable: New Orleans, southern, Chicago, Kansas City;

you name it – they did it. And they did it well.

Best band in the land? Well, they've won that title twice in Down Beat magazine's International Critics Poll and "Blues Band of the Year" in 2004 at the Blues Music Awards.

Truth be told, had there been a vote at this year's jazz festival, they'd have added another accolade to their long list: Best Band of the 2006 Art Tatum Jazz Heritage Festival. The only act to do an encore, Room Full of Blues received the loudest and longest ovation of the day.

The Rhode Island-based group formed in 1967 will be singing the blues for many years to come if the rest of their fans love them as much as their new fans in Toledo.

United Kingdom jazz guitarist Peter White closed the show Saturday, bringing 'all that jazz' back to the festival. His acoustic guitar smoothed out the night, giving it a sound to match the velvet midnight blue sky above.

Audience response indicated not only approval, but also enjoyment of his authentic jazz sound that resonated throughout downtown Toledo like wind and water – cool, natural and refreshing.

Numerous couples attend the jazz festival each year, attracted to the romance of the music, and this year was no exception. Young, old, black, white, Hispanic, bi-racial and same gender – every conceivable coupling converged on International Park to hold hands, cuddle and wrap themselves in music that evokes love and longing, emotion and empathy, desire and dalliance.

Love.

Jazz is the music of lovers, a musical expression of the deepest emotion of all – love, sweet, complicated, funk, cool, and fusion – jazz translating love into its purest form – music.



*Karrin Allyson*

White's mellow guitar licks reduced the crowd to only the lovers- not the music lovers: the pairs of lovers that drew closer to each other to embrace as the smooth sound spread over them like a warm blanket in the surprisingly chilly night air.

The story about what happened at last year's jazz festival was repeated several times during this year's event. George Benson heard The Rance Allen Group from his hotel and hurried over to International Park where he paid admission to get in so he could hear the phenomenal gospel group. People who heard The Rance Allen Group at this year's jazz festival found out firsthand why Benson was so impressed.

Just back from performing in Greensboro, North Carolina, Saturday night, Allen held service Sunday morning before coming to entertain the crowd at the jazz festival. "I'm going to let ya'll sit for the first song," said Rance Allen. "But after than, you gonna have to get up and help me get my praise on!"

Right away Allen had folks on their feet dancing, including local media legend, Bill Harris. The group's first number, "He's a Miracle Worker," had a rock, R&B feel, but the second, "I Belong to You," was all soul – the kind of song The Temptations would have done had they sang gospel. "This is a kind of jazz-flavored, groove kind of thing," Allen said, introducing song number three, "Ain't No Need Cryin'."

Singing "I Got the Joy of The Lord Down in My Soul," Allen cut loose. "Don't ya'll sit on me!" he shouted. "I want ya'll to come on down here and help me dance!" Twenty or more people were dancing in front of the stage as soon as the music started.

The group slowed things down a bit with "Running For My Live," a contemporary gospel number. Going back to gospel roots, "The Sweetest Name I Know," a quartet-style number was probably the best song of the set with its traditional sound and message.

The harmonies sung by the trio were so good, many members of the audience not used to hearing this kind of music live sat in stunned silence, barely able to react until Allen hit a high-pitched trill that sent shivers down the audience's collective spine. Applause erupted as the sweet sound of his voice seemed to pierce the ominous clouds overhead and momentarily calmed the gusty winds that stopped for just a second to listen, not sure whether that beautiful sound was coming from heaven or earth.

The group's finale was a medley of three songs that had over a hundred folks up on their feet dancing while Allen and the other vocalists in the group demonstrated 'the Pentecostal two-step.'

A tribute to recently deceased Toledo jazz great Leon Cook by his son, Damen Cook & Friends was bittersweet, mourning the loss of one of the city's premier jazz guitarists while at the same time celebrating the next generation of jazz musicians as his son, drummer, Damen Cook performed in his father's memory.

Cook accompanied Erick Dickey on piano and the smooth, mellow jazz competed with howling wind, whipping across the river, rustling flags and shaking trees as the sky clouded, cleared and clouded over again, teasingly promising the thunderstorms predicted in local weather forecasts.



*Al Jarreau*

But the sun prevailed, breaking through the storm clouds to let all those mourning the loss of yet another jazz legend, Leon Cook, know that there are brighter days ahead.

As if embodying the old spiritual, dark clouds slowly floated across the sky, whipping the wind up to greater speeds, just as Cook's set ended, indicating that the storm, indeed was passing over.

However, another series of storm clouds interrupted jazz vocalist Karrin Allyson's set halfway through with a downpour that sent everyone scurrying for cover under one of several tents and the park's open shelter. Festival-goers got just a 'glimpse' of Allyson's

sultry vocals before the brief storm.

As the rain subsided, everyone returned to their previous seats, umbrellas raised and waited for the stage full of electrical equipment to be dried so the festival could resume.

Meanwhile, entertaining the crowd while they waited, Hajera moved from promoting the arts between acts to becoming a major act for the festival as they performed for about an hour.

Teacher Talina Tolson, who studied traditional dance in Ghana and Indonesia, formed the group at TSA, where she has taught at the schools since its inception seven years ago.

“The African dance is supposed to show the evolution of jazz from the root to show the connection,” she said. Tolson also teaches the drummers for the group, in addition to choreographing the group’s many dances and designed the group’s ethnic costumes.

“It is my great pleasure to be here tonight to introduce one of my colleagues from The University of Toledo,” said UT president Dr. Daniel Johnson. “In addition to being a distinguished professor at The University of Toledo, it gives me great pleasure to introduce my good friend, Jon Hendricks.”

Hendricks’ vocalese thrilled festivalgoers as his unique singing style has for decades. Joined by his daughter, Aria, who sang a duet with him, he stated that in his family there are no doctors and lawyers. “Everybody’s into jazz,” he said.

“It’s Father’s Day everybody!” exclaimed Aria Hendricks. “And I’m here with my dad and he’s 84 years-old!” Showing off some of his UT students, Hendricks joined them in a song made popular by the group Manhattan Transfer, a group he had a hand in forming.



Hendricks then introduced another one of this student’s, the Grammy Award-winning vocalist, Al Jarreau, headliner for this year’s jazz festival. The two joined in a little vocalese duet, student and teacher harmonizing.

*Jon Richardson, Jon Hendricks, Dan Johnson*

Then, after using his take on vocalese to play a few melodic word games with the word “Toledo,” which he gave the Spanish pronunciation, Jarreau kicked off his set with several songs from his repertoire that had people down front dancing for the second time Sunday.

During his performance, Jarreau made a surprise announcement that harkened back to last year’s festival. “Al Jarreau and George Benson’s new CD,” said Jarreau, teasing the audience. “No, I’m not going to tell you what’s on it. That would ruin the surprise. That would be like having Xmas at Thanksgiving.” He added that the two are working on the CD presently.

Introducing a white member of his band, Jarreau turned a little political. “Al Jarreau, equal opportunity employer,” he quipped. “If you demand it, you should do it.”

A cool breeze wafting from the river was warmed up by some hot licks from Jarreau and his band, reversing the climate and the mood of just one day earlier when it was hot and humid. Showing off his unique ability to produce unusual melodic sounds in a contemporary take on Hendricks’ vocalese, Jarreau kept a good part of the audience of over 2000 on their feet

throughout his 75-minute concert.

Sometimes romantic and sentimental, drawing the festivals characteristic couples closer together and other times swinging and beat-driven, Jarreau's music ran the gamut, showing off his versatility and technical agility.

More rain dampened the spirit of a few who picked up their folding chairs and umbrellas and left for the night, while the diehard fans just popped their umbrellas open and stayed. A diehard himself, Jarreau never missed a beat, continuing to sing on the open-air stage during the steady, slow rain that caused some folk to call it a night.

Leading up to his finale, Jarreau played more vocalese word-games with Daimler-Chrysler as he introduced Frank Fountain, who in turn introduced Toledo City Councilman Michael Ashford. Ashford presented Jarreau with a proclamation which Jarreau passed on to the man he calls his musical 'father,' Jon Hendricks, to keep in his home here in Toledo.

Then Jarreau ended the show and this year's jazz festival with a swinging finale that no one wanted to miss, despite the insistent rain. Staying until the last note, 75 percent of the fans that came out to see him were rewarded for their perseverance with the best performance of the festival.



*Rance Allen*



*Jarreau*