

Jazz has been called America's classical music, although that definition doesn't quite do justice to either form.



Peter Concilio, organizer of JazzFest in Hartland, playing bass, drummer Tim Gilmore, saxophonist Fred Haas, who is founder and director of Interplay Jazz and Arts Summer Workshop, and vibraphonist Rich Greenblatt play at Skunk Hollow Tavern in Hartland. VALLEY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS — THEOPHIL SYSLO

All That's Jazz

Hartland's Peter Concilio Directs Weekend's Festival

By NICOLA SMITH
Valley News Staff Writer

WHEN THE FIRST HARTLAND JazzFest kicks off this Saturday at 11 a.m. at Foster Meadow, showcasing more than 40 local and regional musicians, its artistic director, Peter Concilio, will be in the thick of it all. If you've been to hear jazz at the Skunk Hollow Tavern in Hartland, you've probably seen him: a slight man, bearded, graying hair, rocking back and forth a little as he plays the string bass.

Concilio was 17 and living in his native Connecticut when he heard a jazz band play for the first time. Intent on building a career as a rock singer in the early 1960s, he'd put out a 45 record called *Pete's Blues* with a group called the Cool Notes, and the record attracted some attention. "Everyone thought I was going to be a rock star," he said.

But then he heard a local jazz group, in his hometown of Derby, playing swing music at a high school dance. He was, he said, "transfixed."

From that moment on, he devoted himself to studying and playing an art form that is uniquely American in its fusion of African-American blues and gospel, American folk and popular music, and the Great American Songbook, the flourishing of literate, sophisticated songwriting in the 20th century from composers like Gershwin, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart and Johnny Mercer. Jazz has been called America's classical music, although that definition doesn't quite do justice to either

form. Jazz stands alone, without need of a prop to give it valicity.

"Jazz at its essence is a conversation," said Concilio in an interview at his home in Hartland. "It's all about listening. You can't get on a bandstand with an ego."

The musicians performing Saturday, he said, are

at Dartmouth College is a well-known venue for jazz, for visiting artists, student groups and orchestras.

Such clubs as Tupelo, Elixir and the Canoe Club feature a wide array of musicians, many of whom will be seen at the Hartland festival. Still, it's safe to say that the Upper Valley is not overrun by jazz festivals. But that doesn't mean the music isn't there, hiding in plain sight.

Conversation about a jazz festival in Hartland began last summer, Concilio said. When he told the board of Hartland Community Arts that he could organize a festival, because he'd produced concerts in Connecticut, they jumped at the idea and told him he should run with it. "But I was kidding!" Concilio recalled, joking.

"In scope it's the most ambitious event (Community Arts has done) in terms of the number of performers and having an audience that's much wider than Hartland," said Shelley Jerman, president of Hartland Community Arts. As a longtime jazz fan and a regular audience member for jazz at the Skunk Hollow Tavern, she said she had heard musicians — many of whom are playing at the festival — whose music "is as good as anything we've heard in New York."

Money raised by the festival will go to support both Hartland Community Arts programs and scholarships for students interested in the arts, including those studying jazz, Jerman said.

The Hartland festival is timed to happen just before the Interplay Jazz and Arts Summer Workshop, a weeklong event in Woodstock led by singer Sabrina Brown and her husband, Fred Haas, who



Peter Concilio has devoted himself to studying and playing jazz since he was a teenager.

"all people who've been playing in the Upper Valley a long time, all of whom deserve a wider audience."

You can count on one hand the number of jazz festivals in Vermont. There's the Discover Jazz Festival in Burlington, which happens in early June. The Vermont Jazz Center in Brattleboro hosts concerts throughout the year. And the Hopkins Center

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Peter Concilio and Fellow Jazz Musicians to Play at Hartland Festival

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teaches jazz history and improvisation at Dartmouth and has played with such notable musicians as Oscar Peterson, Ray Charles, Lena Horne and Pat Metheny. Interplay is a retreat of sorts for musicians, both professional and amateur, who want to study and play music with each other.

Some of the professional musicians who will be participating in the Interplay workshop, including saxophonist Michael Zsoldos, bassist Dave Clark, trombonist George Voland, pianist and founder of the Vermont Jazz Center Eugene Uman and Lebanon's Tim Gilmore, a percussionist, will also play at the Hartland Jazz Festival.

"There are a lot of very talented people in the area who do one thing but also play music or sing or play. Even though they get to play in some of the local venues this is a chance to bring them all together in a jazz festival," said Haas.

Among the local musicians appearing at the Hartland Jazz Festival are Concilio, Sabrina Brown, vocalists Chloe Brisson, Susan Brison and Kathi Tarrant-Tafuto, pianist Bob

Merrill, Eric Bronstein's Legendary Thundering Muskrats, the Billy Rosen quartet, David Westphalen and Swing Machine, Tony Mastaler and the Betty Smith Quintet, Jaden Gladstone on tenor saxophone, guitarist and drummer Jack Snyder and the Union High School Band; from Woodstock. They all know or have played with both Haas and Concilio.

Concilio and his wife, Anita Boucher-Concilio, have lived in Hartland for 11 years. After retiring from his job as a high school teacher of film and English in Weston, Conn., he moved north, seeking an environment less suburban, less crowded and more amenable to riding horses, one of his interests. But jazz has been his avocation, along with film. He has also taught classes in film at The Institute for Lifelong Education at Dartmouth.

After that first transformative encounter with the band during high school, Concilio said, he almost immediately went to his local record store and told the owner, one Frank Banko, "Mr. Banko, I want to play jazz."

OK, Banko said, but it's going to take you two to three years of study to



Peter Concilio, left, and Tim Gilmore play at Skunk Hollow Tavern in Hartland. VALLEY NEWS — THEOPHIL SYSLÓ

even get to that point. No, you don't understand, Concilio said: "I want to play jazz now."

So Banko found him an old bass, sold it to him for \$20, and told him, now you have to find a teacher. Concilio located one, a saxophonist named Don DeFala, who taught him theory, harmony and arranging. And from a well-known musician named Joseph Iadone, who, according to his *New York Times* obituary, studied with composer Paul Hindemith at Yale University and played the guitar, bass and lute. Concilio learned to play the bass.

Not that it was easy, Concilio said. When he first played for Iadone, to show him what he could do, Iadone's first reaction was two-fold: First, he

told Concilio, he'd taken up the bass too late in life to play in a symphony orchestra, and second and much more challenging, Concilio had no idea what music really was. Go home and play one note, a B-flat, Iadone told Concilio, and don't come back until you've really played it.

Concilio did as he was told. "I played B-flats and B-flats and B-flats," but nothing seemed to be happening. Until one day, when he drew the bow across the string and, he said, the note "came up through the ground and through me." When he returned to Iadone, Iadone said to him "You played a B-flat, didn't you? Now you know what music is."

Until that point, Concilio said, he'd had "no clue" what Iadone meant.

"But in that moment I discovered it doesn't come out of you or your instrument. When you play at your best, it comes from somewhere else." □

Why jazz has a universal appeal is something to which Concilio has given a great deal of thought. "It speaks to the soul, it's a uniquely American music and some of us are connected immediately to its rhythm and the timbre of the music," he said.

Haas has one answer: "An audience never really knows at any given moment what's going to happen next. If they're astute listeners they can hear the song inside the improvisation. The musicians compose spontaneously in front of an audience. ...

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Peter Concilio and Fellow Jazz Musicians to Play at Festival

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We're creating new harmonies and rhythms that sit within the general framework. What makes it fun for an audience is what makes it fun for musicians."

But like any great art form, jazz resists too obvious or reductive an explanation. "Its a mystery, isn't it?" Concilio said.

He recalled going to Yale to see an exhibition designed by the French horn and bass player Willie Ruff, who is on the faculty at the Yale School of Music and is the founder of the Duke Ellington Fellowship program at the university. Ruff had built a model of the solar system based on the theories of the 17th-century astronomer and mathematician Johannes Kepler, and

set it to music. The planets, said Concilio, "made this deep, beautiful, harmonious sound while they rotated," a celestial music of the spheres.

While Concilio was there, another musician came in to look at it. After the musician had examined it at length, he said to Concilio, "Do you know how God created the universe?" There was a pause. "He sang it into existence."

"It was one of those moments," Concilio said, "where you stop and say, why not?"

The Hartland Jazz Festival will begin at 11 a.m. Saturday and run until 7 p.m., rain or shine, at Foster Meadow in Hartland, off Route 5 near the library. The suggested donation is \$5. Bring chairs and blankets. Food and

drink will be available there. For information, go to: hartlandcommunityarts.org/jazz-festival or call 802-436-3047.

For information on, and a complete schedule for, the Interplay Jazz and

Arts Workshop, which runs from June 24 through July 1, go to: www.interplayjazzandarts.org.



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