

# The Berkshire Eagle

## Making Jazz Classic at Tanglewood

Donal Fox pays tribute to MJQ

By Seth Rogovoy | August 28, 2003

(LENOX, Mass.) – There is always something a little forced about jazz at Tanglewood. The regal summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra rightly lives and breathes classical music – it is its very *raison d'être*, and no attempt to broaden its base by presenting so-called popular artists, like Jethro Tull and Mary Wilson, or crossover programming, like John Pizzarelli and the Boston Pops, is going to change that. The buildings, the stages, the landscaping, all breathe Bach, Beethoven and Brahms, no matter how many times Bennett and Brubeck perform there.

Still, Tanglewood valiantly presents its Labor Day weekend jazz festival every year, and recently, since the programming was turned over to Boston jazz impresario Fred Taylor and his dynamic crew, the event has been infused with new energy and vitality. While there have been a few missteps along the way, for the most part these have been well-curated affairs offering a broad sweep of instrumentalists and singers in a variety of styles, perhaps none as eclectic and far-ranging as this year's lineup, which ranges from the Latin jazz of Gato Barbieri, Michel Camilo and Kenny Barron's *Canta Brazil* to a star-studded miniature blues festival, a tribute to the innovations of the Modern Jazz Quartet, and appearances by two of the most popular jazz-pop vocalists in the world – Norah Jones and Natalie Cole.

All this plus Cassandra Wilson, perhaps the premiere contemporary jazz vocalist (replacing Shirley Horn, who was originally scheduled to perform on Saturday night but who had to cancel due to illness), and the two people perhaps single-handedly most responsible for the perpetuation and popularity of jazz throughout the world – Marian McPartland and Wynton Marsalis.

It will be a piano lover's festival in particular, with two of jazz's hottest young pianists, Michel Camilo and Hiromi, on the bill, as well as McPartland, Jones, and Donal Fox, leading *Inventions in Blue*, his MJQ tribute.

Fox's program, which takes place on Sunday at 1 in the Tanglewood Theatre, is in some ways the missing link between what goes on at Tanglewood all summer long and what takes place this weekend. Much as John Lewis and the Modern Jazz Quartet attempted to reconcile the music of Bach and the blues – which they did for many a summer right down the road from Tanglewood at the Music Inn during the 1950s -- so does Donal Fox explore the affinities between classical music and jazz.

Like Lewis, Fox is well-versed in both jazz and classical, epitomized by his dual education at the New England Conservatory and Berklee College. A 1997 recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship in music composition, he has conducted and performed his compositions with many leading contemporary music ensembles.

In a recent interview from his home in Boston, Fox said it's not a simple thing to mix jazz and classical music.

"The danger is that unless you really do live and breathe and absorb both styles, how can you put them together," he said. "You just can't start sticking certain flavors together. You have to mix them. The Cubans are great because they really absorb all the music they hear and spit it out in their own way. They've got the Afro-Cuban and the jazz and the strong classical background."

Fox said combining jazz and classical came naturally for him as an outgrowth of what he heard as a child.

"The two records I heard the most as a kid at home were the Stravinsky ballets and the 'Birth of the Cool'

by Miles Davis,” he said. “So early on I didn’t see a dividing line. It was all just music I liked. I never thought I had to choose between the two. In a way, I’ve been trying to keep them both going to this day in my playing and in my studies.”

Part of Fox’s studies as a teen-ager were as a Tanglewood fellow with Gunther Schuller, who was instrumental in pioneering a “third stream” of music that would combine jazz and classical, and who also influenced John Lewis. Later on, Fox would return to Tanglewood when a composition of his was featured in the annual Contemporary Music Festival.

With Inventions in Blue, his quartet featuring Stefon Harris on vibraphone, Yoron Israel on drums and John Lockwood on double bass, Fox says he takes work by Scarlatti, Bach, Handel and jazz it up, Latin it up, blues it up.

“When people come to hear the music, what I’m most excited about is we’re in a global society and people have more access to music than anyone before. In my audience I have classical and jazz fans and people new to it all.”