

## “Frank Strazzeri: Jazz’s Great Legacy Preserved” by Kirk Silsbee

The Friday night jazz series at Los Angeles County Museum of Art draws a large and varied crowd. Some are there to hear the music and some—as Duke Ellington observed about the clientele of Harlem’s legendary Cotton Club—to fulfill their social aspirations. Pianist Frank Strazzeri led a band there last summer and a curious thing happened. Sound problems, a restless audience, and tentative musicians plagued the opening set. Strazzeri’s piano was undermiked but by the second set, his piano—at once swinging and full of harmonic beauty, quietly brought the crowd to order and coalesced the rough spots on the bandstand. It was a subtle display of mastery by one of the great jazz masters in our midst.

The 81 year-old Strazzeri has been known as one of the most proficient band pianists and accompanists in Los Angeles since his arrival in 1960. A Rochester native, he was trained at the Eastman School of Music. His tenure as leader of the house band at a local nightclub saw him accompanying visiting headliners like singer Billie Holiday and trumpeter Roy Eldridge. Strazzeri was 18 when he took the job.

After a stint with the Woody Herman Orchestra and an unsatisfying residence in Las Vegas, Strazzeri came west. He succeeded Vince Guaraldi in the Lighthouse All Stars and became a beloved pianist for singer Ruth Price. “He’s one of my very favorite accompanists,” she declares. “One of the things I love about Frank is that he never played for me as he would a singer: leading me with chords. He played for me as he would an instrumentalist; I always appreciated that he trusted me that way.”

Among musicians, Strazzeri’s original pieces hold a special place. Trombonist Steve Johnson’s Jazz Legacy band convenes at Jax on Brand Avenue one night a month, and they only play Strazzeri’s material. It’s the most consistent and extended showcase of the Strazzeri book anywhere. His songs have an innate swing, yet they’re imbued with harmonic intrigue and lyrical beauty.

As a student at the Dick Grove Workshop, a great jazz academy in Hollywood in the 1970s, Johnson encountered Strazzeri’s published musical manual, Strazzophonic. “I was really inspired by it,” Johnson discloses. “It was more modern harmony than the bebop that Strazz came out of. I bought that book and it broadened my harmonic palette. It was clear and helpful to me in the way that it was structured. Even though Strazz had played with all of these more traditional giants, he could learn new things and adapt; not all mature musicians can do that.”

Gaea Schell, Jazz Legacy’s new pianist, had encountered a few Strazzeri numbers on different bandstands. “I’ve played ‘Relaxin’ quite a bit on my own gigs,” she says. “That one stood out; it just makes so much sense to me. It’s fun to play on the form and it’s a little bit unpredictable. His tunes always show an understanding of form and they always have interesting chord changes.”

From his home in Sun Valley, Strazzeri is modest about his abilities. “Writing comes extremely easy to me. I’ve got two books of my tunes out; all of the songs I’ve written: The Music of Frank Strazzeri Volume I and II, on the Strazzeri Publishing Company. I’ve got 45 tunes in one book and 30 in the other.”

What course does Strazzeri follow when he sits down to write? “I like melody,” he states. “Everything I write goes into all kinds of styles. I’m inspired by anyone who writes a good song and I want to be part of that scene.”

Jazz Legacy performs at JAX on Friday, December 9. As always, they’ll be mining that lode of hard swing and harmonic richness.

