

TWO JAZZY DECADES

FOR 20 YEARS, JAZZ ARTS PROJECT HAS KEPT THE BEAT SWINGING IN THE HOMETOWN OF THE LEGENDARY COUNT BASIE.

Triumph Brewery comes alive with jazz. Musicians of all ages and experience levels, from high school students to traveling pros, gather for a Jazz Arts Jam Session hosted by the Red Bank-based Jazz Arts Project. With the backing of a house band, the musicians take the stage and improv, riff and play along with each other. It's low-stress, welcoming and filled with community—everything Artistic Director Joe Muccioli wanted when he founded Jazz Arts Project in 2006.

“This is Red Bank,” Muccioli says, “hometown of Count Basie.” (He means, of course, the famed jazz pianist, band leader and composer, 1904–1984.) “I grew up playing Count Basie music with big bands.” He says the idea for Jazz Arts came to him because “I was traveling quite a bit as a guest conductor. It occurred to me that, to do that work, I needed to leave Red Bank. I thought that maybe I can cook up something here.”

He was a good man for the job. Muccioli is a classically trained trumpet player and a music-industry lifer. He's played in Broadway pits and at Carnegie Hall in addition to conducting the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, the Duke Ellington Orchestra, the Chicago Jazz Ensemble, the BBC Big Band, the Wuppertal Symphony in Germany and the Adelaide Symphony in Australia. He's worked with Grammy-winning musicians and is known for his careful reconstructions of major pieces from the classic jazz repertoire. (His efforts allowed works like the Gil Evans / Miles Davis collaborations to be performed live for the first time in 40 years.) Muccioli began to ask around to see if there would be interest in bringing more jazz to Red Bank. When the answer was yes, he says, “We all became Mickey Rooney. We said, ‘Let's put on a show!’”

Jazz Arts Project has put on many shows since. Besides those weekly jam sessions at Triumph, it organizes the annual Summer of Jazz, which Muccioli describes as “almost an eight-week jazz festival.” There's jazz in Riverside Gardens in Red Bank every week starting in July, a “jazz café” series on Friday and Saturday evenings and more outdoor shows at Red Bank's West Side Johnny Jazz Park in August. Paquito D'Rivera, Jon Faddis and Wycliffe Gordon have all stopped by. Music floods the streets.

But that's only half of what Jazz Arts Project does. "We've always had an education side in addition to the performance side," says Muccioli. Currently at the helm of those efforts is Kiki Rausch, director of education. "We have a free two-week program for middle schoolers who are just starting out, in addition to Jazz Arts Academy, which is for high school students, and a new Junior Jazz Academy, which is also for middle schoolers." She adds: "It's an environment where students are both creative and collaborative at the same time—skills they'll need outside the classroom. We witness these students evolve firsthand. They start off barely able to play a few notes, often shy and scared. And then they transform right in front of us."

Muccioli recalls one transformation: "We had a student once who was pretty neurodivergent, very quiet, not talking to the instructors or other kids. His mother told me that, after his second session, he was grinning from ear to ear. He told her, 'I've finally found my space. I feel like I belong here.'"

Students not only learn to play jazz, but also get to play with and interact with the professionals brought in for the performance side. "These artists mentor the kids," says Rausch. "And then, in our December show, the kids get to play alongside the pros. It's a really unique and cool opportunity for them."

Muccioli says it is indeed cool—and then some. "Jazz speaks to community," he says. "It speaks to freedom and democracy. People who play jazz are free to express themselves completely, but they also need to learn and stick to the rules. We're not just looking to create new jazz musicians—we want to create new audience members. The kids learn how to listen to and appreciate this music."

"Some kids go professional," says Rausch. "They attend the Berklee College of Music in Boston with scholarships or tour Europe. But we also have kids who study things like bio-chem and still play their instruments. They come back on break and play in our jams, just for fun. There's no set path, but they all hold onto these skills and this growth."

Jazz Arts Project itself keeps growing too. This year, it's celebrating Jazz Appreciation Month in April with a series of special Wednesday jazz café nights and a "Havana Nights" gala on April 29 (the day before International Jazz Day) filled with classic cars, Cuban cuisine and Afro-Cuban-Latin music. Its other recent milestone? "Last January, we finally opened a dedicated brick-and-mortar location," says Rausch. Before, the group had been relying on rented space. Now it has more flexibility.

"It's on White Avenue," says Muccioli. "When you walk up, you see Miles Davis painted on the door—a local artist, Michael White, did it for us. It really lets us focus on identifying what else these kids need and what kinds of programs to offer. We can anchor the community and really work with everyone in town."