



Jazz with Soul

By Sharon Nichols | Photo by Fionn Reilly

The cat sitting at the table in front of me is rockin' like a hurricane. He's swaying forward and backward in his chair so hard, with such momentum, I fear he might take off and blast through the small stage in the alcove. On that stage, blonde-tousled, sultry vocalist Pamela Pentony is scatting, swaying, wooing the mike, snapping her fingers. Beads of sweat slide down the sax player's forehead, his eyes bulging from the intensity of his playing. Behind him, the bassist is lost in his own delirium. The look on the drummer's face looks like sheer agony as he flails. There's an unusual number of horns tonight—a new trumpet player is quaking the house; he then steps aside as a new young sax player enlists.

I accidentally stumbled upon this weekly scene a few months back at The Chowhound Cafe, a cozy bistro in the middle of Saugerties, and it's become my favorite good habit. Since last October, Pentony's filled the place every Sunday night—the chairs with mesmerized listeners, and the air with the finest improv jazz. With different players and singers stepping onstage week after week, one might think it's an open mike. But Pentony says it's not.

"That's a different thing," she explains in a speaking voice that's as silky as a whisper. "It's a jam. It's open, welcoming, and supportive of whoever comes to play, whether they're fine, seasoned musicians who we know who've come from New York City and Albany, or whether they're our students getting up there for the first time."

By "our" Pentony means those students she and co-host John Esposito teach at Bard. Pentony's an adjunct teaching singing and jazz choral, while Esposito's a working musician and a professor teaching harmony and piano. Known by many as "The Piano God," Esposito can't join Pentony every week due to his hectic schedule.

These two teachers have definite opinions about what's going on in jazz music education today—most instructors aren't presenting the early works, for one thing, which Pentony and Esposito see as a crucial basis for the genre. Many teachers start with the works of the 1920s; these two dig into the roots of the 1890s. Last semester they taught a Tin Pan Alley repertoire—Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Johnny Mercer, Duke Ellington, and some of the really early artists, moving through them chronologically.

"In a lot of music education, kids aren't learning the early stuff," says Pentony. "We teach lots and lots of tunes, so they come out prepared. If you're hired to play a gig, if you want to be a working musician, you have to be able to play tunes!" She laughs. "You can't just know a chord and read a chart; you have to know structure. Honestly, there are only about seven tunes in the world—the structure, the shape of them—so we teach them, and the students begin to recognize the relationships. And singers are what keep the songs alive. We ferret out the lyric and verse and keep it going, like an oral tradition."

And that tradition continues to be passed on as these students participate in the jam. Not only are they afforded a wonderfully supportive atmosphere in which to play, but they are also able to meet seasoned musicians with whom to study. Pentony does hire a rhythm section—Lew Scott on bass and Pete O'Brien on drums—and this core band begins each session. "I don't want this to be tired, I want it to be sparkling, spectacular!" she emphasizes. "And it usually is. It can be difficult, especially for a singer who's in a certain key, if the musicians are not capable of transposing to that key. It's not a good learning situation. So we keep the level very high."

According to the host, some of these seasoned players—to cover all ground—have "played with everybody." There's drummer Master Marvin "Bugalu" Smith on drums, who always has a few tricks up his sleeve; bassists Rob Kopec, Tom Charlap, and legendary Alan Murphy; Albany's Mitch Kessler on sax; and even guitarist Mike DeMicco and sax player Brian Madden play on occasion. These adepts are happy to hand their improv spirit down to the younger crowd.

"It's really about passing it on," Pentony says. "Jazz has had a resurgence, but oddly enough there's this hidebound thing where people only play things from the '60s, and they're not really experimenting or investigating. Jazz is supposed to be free music that goes forward, so those of us who carry that in our hearts are trying to pass it on to the younger generation."

Ultimately this jam gets down to the heart and spirit of the matter, and you feel it when you walk in, when you sit and listen, when the warm, tasty vibe penetrates you to the marrow. Kicking back to this fabulous music and enjoying a meal and glass of wine has become the perfect way to end a weekend for everyone involved. Last year, when Pentony approached owner Candida Ellis with the idea, she told her of the jam she once hosted in Greene County where patrons were six-deep at the bar. Ellis conceded. "She's very committed to the music," says Pentony. "Her great heart enables the music to happen."

What else contributes to this great vibe? Permitting everyone their turn play. "Usually players go to jam sessions, they sign up, they go and they go and never get to play. With us, there's no list. I just try to make sure everyone gets a chance. Sometimes there are 10 drummers." She laughs. "That's a little difficult! They might only get one or two tunes, but we're respectful and kind to them. Some are fine musicians, some are students, but everyone gets to play. There's no place for ego here. Anyone who does that isn't very welcomed. This jam is about the soul of the music going forth, the openness of the heart. That vibe is very important."

Pentony is modest in talking about her background, though larger-than-life names occasionally pop up. Beginning as a dancer, she moved into theater and voice study. Her first job was a Broadway show with Nell Carter and Richard Gere; it was also his first job. Pentony's next-door neighbor in Manhattan, Barry Manilow, played her theater auditions before his day in the sun. Again, she laughs. "I'm in books about him, and his fan clubs call me all the time for interviews. I'm on one of his albums, too, singing back up. "'Could It Be Magic'?...What was it?" She doesn't remember. She does recall hanging with Liza, Lorna, and Bette, and later Tommy Lee Jones. "I always say that everybody I know got famous."

Pentony's vocals led her to Broadway and the National Theater of London, and she won an American Women in Radio and TV award for voice-over work. Eventually her vocal system began to change. "In Broadway they like a high belt; it's a very high system in the body, just below the chest. I was singing like Janis Joplin then. I was a screamer. Then I met this amazing vocal teacher, dropped the support system lower in the body, and gained another octave." Pentony began investigating the voice, its musicality, and the delivery of art songs. Fifteen years ago, after performing some of John Esposito's intricate, rangy vocal music, she took the suggestion of teacher Jay Pouhe and began teaching voice.

Hopefully, this jazz jam isn't going anywhere anytime soon. The only Sunday they've missed so far was during a blizzard. There's even a gig set to follow the Saugerties Jazz Festival on September 12. If players from the day show slip into this night session, the place might detonate.

For more info, call Chowhound Cafe at (845) 246-5158, Pentony: (845) 246-1058.