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Backgrounder: Evergreen Jazz Festival *16 Years of Traditional Jazz*

For 16 years, Evergreen, Colorado, the picturesque mountain town just 30 minutes west of Denver, has been home to what one jazz columnist called “the best jazz festival anywhere.”

The Festival was founded by Sterling Nelson, who served as the Festival music director until retiring in 2010. He traveled the country over the years to find traditional jazz groups and individual musicians who have helped the Festival gain its reputation for excellence.

It was Nelson’s 70th birthday that helped launch the Festival. To help him celebrate, he invited local jazz musicians to jam at his party. It was such a success that one his friends enthused, “We ought to do this every year!” After the initial Festival in 2001 proved an artistic success, organizers took a year off to develop a business plan and fundraising effort, but in 2003 they produced the second EJF. They’ve done it every year since, presenting top musicians from across the country.

The Festival is the product of a dedicated community where more than 100 volunteers each year come together for the three-day production. With music as broad and varied as jazz, Nelson and his fellow organizers chose to highlight traditional jazz, meaning the music through World War II. The 30s and 40s were the Swing Era, where jazz was the popular dance music of the time. Before that was Dixieland and the ancestors of jazz, ragtime and the blues. It is the music where if you’re not tapping your foot, your heart probably isn’t beating.

Nelson set the quality standard with the inaugural Festival featuring such greats as Hal Smith’s Roadrunners with vocal star Rebecca Kilgore, James Dapogny’s Chicago Jazz Band, the Golden Gate Rhythm Machine and from *A Prairie Home Companion* radio fame Andy Stein and Pat Donohue. Over the years many of the biggest names in traditional jazz have thrilled Evergreen audiences: Carl Sonny Leyland, Jon-Erik Kellso, Bob Cooke, Kim Cusack, Terry Waldo, Bob Schultz, Doug Finke, Duke Heitger, Leon Oakley, Anita Thomas, Danny Coots, Clint Baker, Jeff Barnhart, Nicki Parrott, and countless others. Many were leaders of their bands, but many others were simply world-class sidemen performing in relative anonymity.

Maybe it all shouldn’t be so surprising. Without a river delta, or a Savoy Ballroom, or an 18th & Vine, Evergreen has had its own modest jazz heritage that the Evergreen Jazz Festival is building upon. One of the original EJF venues is the Little Bear Saloon. Though today it has carved out its

own reputation as a western “saloon,” it was once called the Red Ram, and that sign still adorns the rustic building on Evergreen’s Main Street. During the late 1960s and early 70s, the Red Ram often featured the big bands of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Buddy Rich, Woody Herman, Glenn Miller and others.

The intimate venues for EJF allow the patrons to tap, sway, dance and enjoy in a totally up-close-and-personal style. The headquarters venue is the Evergreen Elks Lodge which has two stages, the ballroom with a large dance floor and the patio, which many have said is like enjoying world-class jazz in your own backyard. Evergreen Lake House is a beautiful log structure on the shore of Evergreen Lake. The fourth venue is Evergreen Christian Church, whose sanctuary boasts truly amazing acoustics. The newly remodeled Rocky Mountain High Restaurant & Bar, formerly Stagecoach Sports Grill, is the newest venue, having replaced the Little Bear in 2013. A regular, free shuttle service connects all the venues. Food and bar service are available at all but the church, although it does offer tasty items fresh off the barbecue grill.

Every Festival Sunday begins with a gospel service at the church. The service features Denver’s own Queen City Jazz Band and vocal star Wende Harston. Many critics and fans call her a modern-day Bessie Smith, and as one Denver radio personality put it, “With Wende leading the service, you know you’ve been to church!”

Included in the Festival mission statement is a commitment to jazz education. A key educational activity is the student clinics held on Thursday and Friday of Festival Week, providing student musicians with the opportunity to learn from many of the pros performing in the Festival.

Patrons also have the opportunity to experience the future of traditional jazz, most recently in the form of the Denver Jazz Club Youth All-Stars and from the University of Colorado-Denver, the Claim Jumpers.

Each year, the Festival opens with a two-hour educational presentation featuring one or two musicians appearing that year. Among the past presenters are James Dapogny, ragtime legend Terry Waldo and New Orleans piano favorite John Royen. The 2017 program will feature presentations/performances by several student clinic instructors, plus a jam session with students and their instructors. It is certain to provide another outstanding kickoff for the Festival.

The Evergreen Jazz Festival is organized as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation and is managed and produced by volunteers in and around the Evergreen, Colo. community. Funding is provided by ticket sales, grants, sponsorships, individual contributions and fundraising events. The Festival website is www.EvergreenJazz.org

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