

Q&A with Steven Bensusan on the Blue Note Jazz Festival

By Justin Tedaldi

May 26, 2011

As the president of Blue Note Entertainment and its legendary namesake jazz club in the heart of Greenwich Village, Steven Bensusan has spent a lifetime soaking up that most signature of American arts. Kicking off the club's 30th anniversary on June 1 is the inaugural Blue Note Jazz Festival which will showcase a score of jazz giants and other top performers across New York City.

Scheduled performers for the month-long celebration include Dave Brubeck, Chris Botti, Nancy Wilson, Bobby McFerrin, Roberta Flack, Brian Wilson, Medeski Martin & Wood, El Gran Combo, McCoy Tyner, Youssou N'Dour, Bill Frisell, Meshell Ndegeocello, Madeleine Peyroux, Chaka Khan, and many more. I caught up with Bensusan in this exclusive interview.

How did this festival come together?

The Blue Note Jazz Club was founded by my father Danny Bensusan in 1981. This year being our 30th anniversary, we wanted to celebrate the milestone in a big way. We've had opportunities to start a Blue Note Jazz Festival before, but this was the first year that there was a real opening for a new mainstream jazz festival. So we decided to fill the void and try our hand at putting together a number of shows throughout New York City in honor of our 30th anniversary. We've put together over 80 shows at 12 different venues, including a special series of shows at the Blue Note.

Which shows at the festival would you recommend for someone who's a jazz novice? How about hardcore fans who think they've seen it all?

We're confident that there's something for everyone at the Blue Note Jazz Festival. People often get introduced to jazz by hearing jazz vocalists first, and we have a number of incredible jazz vocalists performing during the festival. At the Blue Note alone, we have the Manhattan Transfer from June 16-19, legendary vocalist Jimmy Scott on June 23, followed by Jon Hendricks and Annie Ross on June 27-29 with 17-year-old singing sensation Nikki Yanofsky joining them as a special guest on the 29th. At B.B. King Blues Club & Grill in Times Square, we are hosting Diane Schuur, Roberta Flack, Chaka Khan and Nancy Wilson, all within a two-week span. We also have some really popular jazz artists like Chris Botti on the festival lineup, who will be performing at the Beacon Theatre on June 23.

For the hardcore fans, we have a fantastic new series at the Blue Note called Spontaneous Construction, presented by Search & Restore. The series takes place every Friday night at 12:30 a.m., it costs only \$10, and it brings legendary and up-and-coming jazz musicians together on stage for the first time to create spontaneous improvisatory music on the spot. We also have partnered with JazzReach, a non-profit organization dedicated to educating young people, to present performances to hundreds of New York City Public School students from June 1-3 at the Highline Ballroom. So there's really something for everyone at the Blue Note Jazz Festival!

How did you first get involved with the Blue Note?

My father Danny Bensusan founded the Blue Note 30 years ago, and I grew up listening to jazz and hanging out with some of the greatest musicians of all time. By the time I finished college, I

knew I wanted to join the family business and help expand this great music to the next generation.

What originally sparked your interest in jazz?

I've been around jazz for most of my life. I remember hanging out with Dizzy Gillespie in the dressing room or coming back from college to hear some of the great artists like Ray Charles and Tony Bennett. When you're seeing artists of that caliber in such a small space, it's hard not to get inspired by their artistry and fall in love with the music.

What are some your favorite moments from the concerts you've seen? How about at the Blue Note?

There have been a lot of great events at the Blue Note and our other clubs, B.B. King Blues Club in Times Square and the Highline Ballroom, which we opened in 2007. At B.B.'s, seeing James Brown perform on New Year's Eve was always a great show. At the Highline, we've had high-profile artists like Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder, and even Justin Bieber perform, so those have all been exciting shows. One of the best concerts I've ever seen at the Blue Note was when Keith Jarrett performed at the Blue Note for three nights in 1994—I didn't miss a note. Ray Charles' performances here over the years were definitely special, as were performances by legends like George Benson, Herbie Hancock, and Wayne Shorter.

We had Elton John join jazz vocalist Jimmy Scott a few years back, and Billy Joel came and played with harmonica pioneer Toots Thielemans, both of which were great shows. But we have plenty of exciting things happen all the time at the club today. Earlier this year we had Lupe Fiasco on stage at the Blue Note with the Robert Glasper Experiment in a jazz-meets-hip-hop show. Mos Def went onstage and started freestyling, followed by Kanye West. So you never really know what's going to happen at the Blue Note because people just love performing here.

Tell us what goes into booking the schedule for shows each month. How do you go about selecting new acts that haven't played the Blue Note before?

We try to have a mix of booking artists who have been loyal to the club for years as well as those who are up-and-coming. It's very important for us to build the next generation of great jazz musicians. In the past few years we've lost so many of the greats, and in order to keep jazz relevant, it's our duty to expose young talent to our audiences.

Who's on your wish list of artists who haven't played the Blue Note?

Pat Metheny was number one on our wish list for a while, and we finally booked him for a week this coming October. Number two on our list was John McLaughlin, and we've also secured him for a week with Chick Corea in November. We'd love to have Sonny Rollins at the club at some point—he's a legend and since he rarely plays small rooms, a Blue Note date would be a major event in New York City. We'd also love to have Joni Mitchell, who has a tremendous following worldwide but is held in very high esteem by the jazz community. We always wanted to have Brian Wilson from the Beach Boys at the Highline Ballroom, and he'll be there from June 11-13 as a part of the Blue Note Jazz Festival, which we are really excited about.

In your opinion, what are some of New York's biggest contributions to jazz?

It's really a symbiotic relationship between the clubs, the fans, and the musicians in New York—you need all three to be successful. New York City is the cultural center of the world, so it's not a surprise that jazz thrives here and has for so many years. I'd like to think that the Blue Note has made a significant contribution to the jazz scene in New York City over the last 30 years.

The Blue Note also has locations in Milan, Tokyo and Nagoya. Tokyo is a Mecca for jazz fans in Asia, but what is it about the other two cities that have allowed those clubs to thrive?

Jazz is very popular all over Japan, not just in Tokyo, and many of the artists who play the Blue Note in New York on a regular basis also play our clubs in Japan. The same goes for the Blue Note in Milan—there is a large European jazz community and fans who love the music.

There have been many Japan-related benefit concerts in New York since the Sendai earthquake and tsunami. Why do you think Japanese people have such a fondness for jazz?

We held our Blue Note Jazz Benefit for Japan at the Highline Ballroom last month and we were very pleased with the incredible number of musicians who came out to support the relief efforts. The Japanese people are very appreciative of the arts and have always recognized both the complexity and beauty of jazz and improvised music. The American musicians know this and many of them play in Japan multiple times a year. So when the natural disasters hit, they jumped at the chance to help in any way possible.

Besides Japan, what other nationalities are well represented at Blue Note gigs? Do you see any growth from places like China, Russia or South America?

The Blue Note stage has hosted jazz musicians from all over the world. Just this week, we had an all-star ensemble from Latvia come over as a part of the Rigas-Ritmi Jazz Festival and perform with American stars Chris Potter and Brian Lynch. We had French pianist Michel Legrand earlier this year, and for the Blue Note Jazz Festival we have a slew of international artists such as Brazilian singer and guitarist Milton Nascimento, who will perform at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Hall on June 24; Senegal's star Youssou N'Dour, who will be at Terminal 5; and Cuban singer/songwriter Carlos Varela, among plenty of others.

What does thirty years of the Blue Note mean to you, and what would you like people to remember as your family's legacy?

After 30 years, there have been a lot of incredible moments at the Blue Note, and we're looking forward to creating new ones. We are proud that so many great jazz musicians consider the Blue Note a home away from home, and we want to continue that legacy for many years to come. *The Blue Note Jazz Festival runs June 1-30 in New York City. For more information, venues and tickets, visit www.bluenotejazzfestival.com. Visit the Blue Note's homepage at www.bluenote.net.*