



Paul Wesley

## All That Jazz

*Experienced jazz pianist and vocalist Myra Murphy plays with three other local musicians in both a jazz trio and a quartet, keeping alive America's greatest music*

by Patti Guthrie

Myra Murphy has been playing piano nearly all of her life. She grew up loving both jazz and classical music. She started lessons at nine and heard her first jazz record at age 11. “It was Nellie Lutcher playing the piano and singing *His Fine Brown Frame*. I was hooked on her singing and the music—her voice, the lyrics, the life inside of them and the combination of her voice and the piano.”

Myra feels she's doing her very best jazz playing right now as part of two groups, the Myra Murphy Trio and the Myra Murphy Quartet. Her trio features her on piano and vocals, drummer Alex Maio and Josh Machiz on bass. Her quartet is the same three, plus Chris Covatta on guitar. The two groups play gigs throughout the tri-state area. All four also are involved in other groups, as well as their own solo projects. Their repertoire consists mainly of selections from the *Great American Songbook*, classics by Jerome Kern, George Gershwin, Cole Porter and so on.

"We're trying to do positive songs," Myra said. "Music should lift you up, making the hearing experience as wonderful as possible. People are hungry for something beautiful. I'm going to make it as real as I can for my audience. When it's really good, it's going to take people away. Music is like paintings, like poetry. It illuminates, humbles and lifts us up."

Improvisation, Myra explained, is what sets jazz apart from other music. "We take harmonic chords and make up new melodies over the chord changes. The harmonic chords of the Great American Songbook are so well constructed there are endless possibilities. The improv should be fresh every time." She added, "All musicians want to move their audiences, they want the heart and head to join. They want to lift the music directly off the page and bring it to life, making it palpable."

A New York City transplant, Myra moved to Bucks County in 2003 to be near her older daughter Jennifer Robinson who is the press officer for PennDOT. Miriam, her younger daughter, lives in Richmond, Virginia. Myra's grandson Kevin is in his final year at George Washington University studying classical guitar. She smiles at the thought of the two of them performing together some day, perhaps recording a CD.

Born in the Bronx but reared in Brooklyn, Myra said, "My personality is such that I grew up believing I could do anything I wanted to do." After hearing Nellie Lutcher, she discovered Billie Holiday. "By the time I was fifteen, I was going into Manhattan to Birdland by myself. I loved the jazz thing. I heard a lot of the great performers." She added, "Every gig I do now, I hear and see those people in front of me."

After graduation from Midwood High School, she went to Brooklyn College where she met one of her mentors, Professor Robert Hickok who had studied at Yale under Paul Hindemith, the renowned classical composer. Myra was accompanist for the Brooklyn College chorus that performed high end choral music from the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. She went to Julliard on a scholarship, which required an audition. Her mas-

ter teachers at Julliard wanted her to concentrate on Romantic choral music. But, young Myra was more interested in the earlier choral work Hickok had introduced to her. She said, "At Julliard, I learned excellence, attention to the emotional detail." While there, she earned her Master of Science in choral conducting.

She and Art Murphy, whom she'd met several years earlier, attended Julliard together. He was a masters graduate in composition. "I was married to a genius," she said. "He played jazz piano and was a great pianist, as well as a great composer. He transcribed the piano work of Bill Evans and did all of the mental preparation for Steve Reich and Phillip Glass." Art Murphy died in 2006, which in a way has allowed Myra to emerge from his shadow, leading to the best jazz piano playing of her long career—a career that includes a couple of performances at the Lincoln Center, particularly one for the New York Philharmonic fund-raising group several years ago, and a gig in the Plaza Hotel at the Palm Court this past November.

After Julliard, Myra studied voice. "My next mentor was Andy Thomas Anselmo, a voice teacher at Lee Strasberg Theater and Film Institute. I took classes from him at the Clark Center 'Y' and learned the process of investing some form of your own personal experience into what you're singing. It's the same as method acting." She added, "Instrumentalists do the same thing—truthfulness—being in the present. You have a storyline that may or may not relate to the lyrics." She played in a quintet in Manhattan. "I did not feel secure in jazz piano at that time. It takes years to learn and become comfortable with it."

In the late 1960s, when her girls were young, Myra lived in New Jersey, and then moved near Quakertown 1970s. She said, "I improved my piano playing. A lot of it was listening. It was great to learn. I was going back to music and played with a group.

In 1980, Myra started teaching at then Glassboro College now Rowan University. She was a vocal jazz instructor for four years. After that she taught Evolution of Jazz at the

Allentown campus of Penn State University and at Moravian College for a couple of years. "Studies like the Evolution of Jazz and Growth and Development of Jazz are much larger now than they used to be." She also taught at Columbia University when she moved back to New York City for three years in the late 1980s.

She presently teaches jazz piano to private students. "In fact, everyone in my groups teaches." Actually, she met Doylestown native Chris Covatta in 2005 when both were teaching at D-town Guitars. Chris studied at Berklee College of Music in Boston and at the Princeton Conservatory with pianist Lori Altman. He had further private study with Philadelphia composer and guitarist Steve Giordano and in classical composition with composer Andrea Clearfield. Chris is an extremely active composer and performer involved with several groups, including his original one MiHead UrHead and the Chris Covatta Quartet, as well as the two rock projects Matt Taylor's Aderbat and James Seward's Prophets in Stereo. In addition, Chris offers private lessons and teaches at the Lewis School in Princeton, NJ. "I get a lot of inspiration from him," Myra said of this enormously talented musician.

Through Chris, Myra met Alex Maio, the drummer in her trio and quartet. Alex, also a Doylestown native, began studying drums when he was age 7, continuing his education at Temple University, where he was mentored by some of the finest teachers in the country. He presently lives in Philadelphia where he teaches and is an active performer with several groups. He also teaches the Jazz Workshops at Montgomery County Community College, a program initiated by Myra in 2005. She explained, "I offered the workshop to both Montgomery and Bucks County Community Colleges. Four signed up at each location. Bucks cancelled it, while at Montgomery, the woman in charge asked if I'd take a cut in salary to run it." Myra readily agreed. Since then, the Jazz Improvisation Work-shop, an eight-week program designed for adults interested in learning jazz repertoire and improvisation, has grown each year. In 2008,

she turned over the teaching duties to Alex, as the Workshops continue to grow, now with two sections.

Bass player Joshua Machiz joined Myra's groups in 2008. Born in Washington, DC, he grew up playing in rock bands and orchestras. He was introduced to jazz while attending the Boyer College of Music at Temple University. He's been an active member of the Philadelphia jazz community ever since. Currently, he's involved in several different groups. Also, he's on the faculty at the Philadelphia Clef Club and serves as the volunteer Music Coordinator for the Philadelphia Senior Center.

Said Myra of these three musicians, "They're comfortable in their own skins. The energy they have in their other groups is brought to our gigs. What I'm looking for is special. Each of us has to bring an emotional presence to every performance—a personal investment. The communication and interaction within the group is absolutely essential to the music, to the jazz. With my musicians, there's a dynamic, incredible interaction. Their energy lifts me up. I try to answer that."

In New York, Myra admits, it still is hard being a woman in jazz. In fact, jazz can be a rough business. But she said, "I'm happy to be doing what I do

now. I feel fully accepted as a musician. My music is alive and flourishing. That's all I want."

To find out where Myra's groups are performing, visit her website at [MyraMurphyMusic.com](http://MyraMurphyMusic.com). To inquire about Myra's private jazz piano lessons, you can contact her at [musicmyra@aol.com](mailto:musicmyra@aol.com). If you want guitar lessons, Chris can be reached at [covatta7@gmail.com](mailto:covatta7@gmail.com), drum lessons, get in touch with Alex at [alexmaiomusic@yahoo.com](mailto:alexmaiomusic@yahoo.com) or bass lessons, contact Josh at [jmachiz@temple.edu](mailto:jmachiz@temple.edu). ❖

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