

Fifth annual Silver Spring Jazz Festival

by Chris Slattery | Staff Writer



PHOTOS BY NAOMI BROOKNER/THE GAZETTE
Silver Spring entrepreneur and jazz keyboardist Marcus Johnson gets into the groove at last year's Silver Spring Jazz Festival (above), while Cassie Lee of Rockville (below) shows her appreciation for the music.



If you play it, they will come.

That's thing about good jazz. It doesn't need any crazy cornstalk field of dreams to make people decide to put their Saturday business on hold and come out with a beach chair and a blanket and a basket of supper. Good jazz – and that is what has been at the heart of the Silver Spring Jazz Festival since it began in 2003 – is enough to attract crowds that number into the tens of thousands to come to a parking lot behind an office building in a suburban city and listen to the music.

"It's the glue to the community," says Marcus Johnson, the Silver Spring musician-producer-entrepreneur who has been involved with the festival from day one – before day one, actually.

"The idea was to have a jazz festival with national and local artists," he remembers, "and to have it in the streets.

"We had such success the first year," he adds. "20, 25 thousand people coming out to see the event."

The event has many facets, he adds, but at its heart, it celebrates what it means to be a community that appreciates and values the arts.

"The Silver Spring Jazz Festival means more great, affordable – as in free! – music for the community," Johnson says. "We're keeping the vibe going so people can come out and enjoy affordable quality music."

Downtown Silver Spring is no stranger to the occasional traffic jam – but on the afternoon of the Silver Spring Jazz Festival, traffic takes on a whole new look. Colorful floats festooned with streamers bear the county's top teenage jazz musicians in a parade that's part Main Street and part Bourbon Street.

"It's a great way to showcase the talent that's right here in the southern part of the county," says Johnson. "We give back to the community through the kids."

Not that the kids don't get something out of it. Participation in the New Orleans-style Jazz Ensemble Caravan, a New Orleans-style parade of youth jazz ensembles, is strictly by invitation. And only the best can battle in the cutting competition that follows the jazz caravan. This year's junior jazz-off will be between the 2007 champion Albert Einstein High School Jazz Band, directed by Joan Rackey, and the challengers, the James Hubert Blake High School Jazz Band, directed by Brian Damron, and The Jazz Academy of Music, directed by Paul Carr.

Two songs per band — one up-tempo and one slow – and then the panel of jazz professionals and personalities decides the winner, awards the trophy and opens the festival up to the pros.

First up: Gail Shipp, a D.C. native who came back to settle with her family in Silver Spring 11 years ago – and never missed a Silver Spring Jazz Festival.

"I'd gone every year," she says, "and I always saw myself up on the stage.

"I'd see someone like Marcus Johnson perform, and I'd say, 'Gee, I wanna be up there!'"

Shipp grew up singing rhythm and blues, but at heart, she was a jazz singer.

"My parents played jazz when I was a little girl," she explains. "That's all they played: Sarah Vaughan, Nancy Wilson, Lou Rawls, Louie Prima – all the jazz greats.

"Later, when I went into the studio to sing the engineer would stop me: 'You're singing it too jazzy!'"

"I've been down the R&B road," she adds, "but jazz suits me."

Which is why, after putting her music career on hold to raise her children, she's back to performing on stage.

"It's my time," says Shipp. Her youngest is 11, she's had a day job downtown for 16 years, but this weekend will be her chance to sing and to shine — and to set an example for others.

"This is a great opportunity for young jazz musicians to see what it takes," she says. "And I'm not just there as a spectator. I'm working, I'm watching, I'm learning."

Larger than Life

Every festival has its headliner, and on Saturday night, the Silver Spring Jazz Festival features the Mingus Big Band.

"We've done a Latin theme, Spyro Gyra. This gives us another flavor," says Johnson. "Mingus, as a bass player, was incredible; he made his bass sing."

"One of my favorites of all the jazz standards was 'Goodbye Porkpie Hat,' he adds. "It was a tribute to Lester Young when he died."

During his career, Charles Mingus composed his share of tributes to the jazz icons he loved. His widow Sue Graham Mingus is in charge of the groundbreaking performer-composer's legacy. She's the artistic director of his band, the author of an extraordinary memoir called "Tonight at Noon: A Love Story" and the keeper of a flame that burns brightly nearly three decades after his death.

"When Charles died, he was known primarily as a virtuoso bass player and band leader," she says, "and a larger-than-life personality on stage — which he was!"

He was less thought of as a composer, she adds, "because he had this outsize personality."

Duke Ellington and Thelonius Monk were mild-mannered by comparison. Mingus, born in Watts, Calif., in 1922 and coming up savvy in the pre-Civil rights era, saw no point in reining in his personality for the sake of his art. His antics — and his legendary performances — have faded from memory since his death from ALS in 1979. What remains is his music: "Over 300 compositions of enormous variety," says Sue Graham Mingus. "The music is very personal; it really covers the waterfront."

"It's not just jazz: it's drenched in the blues."

And it's increasingly popular. The original Mingus legacy band, a seven-piece ensemble, formed the year the great musician died. There's an orchestra now, and the 14-musician Mingus Big Band, which will take center stage at the Silver Spring Jazz Festival.

Sue Graham Mingus says the Mingus music is a perfect fit for a festival focused on young performers, local talent and community togetherness.

"This music has enormous energy," she says. "It really demands that individual musicians come in and play themselves, tell who they are. There are lots of open spaces."

The Mingus oeuvre of more than 300 compositions can be challenging, and rewarding, for musicians and listeners alike. The score of his orchestral masterpiece "Epitaph" is 500 pages, and there's a whole sub-genre known as "Simply Mingus" that's recommended for students. But Sue Graham Mingus wants her husband's legacy to include his sense of fun and wonder – and empathy.

"Charles appreciated the idea of risk and surprises," she says.

"That's what we associate with jazz. You take risks, and stumble sometimes, and recover. We thrive on the unpredictability and excitement."

2–3 p.m.

Jazz Caravan

3-3:45 p.m.

High School Youth Cutting Contest and Judging

3:45-4 p.m.

Award of Silver Spring Jazz Festival Trophy

4-5 p.m.

Gail Shipp – vocalist

5:15-6:15 p.m.

Samambaia Quintet – latin jazz

6:30-7:30 p.m.

Yaron Elyashiv – jazz saxophonist

7:45-8:45 p.m.

The Marcus Johnson Project – smooth jazz

9-10:30 p.m.

The Mingus Big Band

**The Silver Spring Jazz Festival takes place Saturday,
2 to 10 p.m., in the parking lot behind the Lee Building at Georgia
Avenue and Colesville Road.**