

JerseyJazz

Journal of the New Jersey Jazz Society

Dedicated to the performance,

promotion and preservation of jazz.

Volume 40 • Issue 2
March 2012



During a Lindy Hop workshop weekend in November, 2011, Gordon Webster and band recorded a live CD at the Harro East Ballroom in Rochester, New York.

Photo by Lynn Redmile.

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Gordon Webster: Jazz and Dance Man

Pianist and bandleader Gordon Webster, who hails from Ottawa, Canada, calls New Jersey home these days. At least on those rare days when he actually is at home. A look at his Web site's tour dates for the next few months finds him flitting from performances in Portugal to Poughkeepsie, to Orlando and Tampa, with a quick stop in Whippany before

moving on to Houston, Ottawa and Barcelona. After which, why not travel to the other side of the world and barnstorm Australia for a few weeks?

Born into a musical family, Gordon took up the piano at age four. After studying jazz piano at the University of Toronto he became obsessed with the Lindy Hop in

2001, and in short order, he's become one of the most popular, sought-after musicians by the burgeoning and global swing dance world. Swing dance scene photographer Lynn Redmile caught up with Gordon at a recent weekend in Rochester, New York and shares her encounter in this month's issue of *Jersey Jazz*.

Story and more photos begin on page 26.

The roar of the crowd was quite deafening. The question had been simple: “Are you having a good time?” But it was Gordon Webster doing the asking — and the crowd wanted more.

Gordon Webster, pianist and bandleader, is one of the most sought-after musicians in the Lindy Hop arena. He has played at hundreds of dance events all over the world, providing irresistible danceability through his tremendous musicianship and passion, and first-hand knowledge of social dancing. Inspired by such luminaries as Fats Waller, Count Basie, Oscar Peterson and Gene Harris, Gordon continues to pay homage to their musical creations with crisp, clean dexterity. His irrepressible joy and excitement is tangible while he plays — clearly felt and echoed by his band, and by the dancers who strive to reproduce in movement on the dance floor what they hear.

During the weekend of November 18 and 19 2011, Gordon Webster “and friends” recorded a CD (his fourth) during two live performances at the beautiful Harro East Ballroom in Rochester, New York. The event was a Lindy Hop workshop weekend, hosted by Groove Juice Swing, taught by international star instructors Steven Mitchell and Virginie Jensen, and Gordon’s band provided the music for the evening dances. Joining Gordon were Cassidy Holden (guitar), Rob Adkins (bass), Jeremy Noller (drums), Aurora Nealand (reeds and vocals), Matt Musselman (trombone), Jesse Selengut (trumpet and vocals), Gordon Au (trumpet), Dan Levinson (reeds) and Naomi Uyama (vocals).

But Gordon doesn’t only play for dancers. He is an eclectic musician, holding a Bachelor of Music from the University of Toronto, and a Masters of Jazz Studies from the Manhattan School of Music — he sees value in many styles of music. In addition to collaborating with some of Canada’s finest jazz instrumentalists and singers while playing at top Toronto clubs, Gordon has also studied privately with Kenny Barron and Garry Dial, among others, and has performed with a number of well-known jazz musicians as diverse as Wycliffe Gordon, Tim Hagans, Dan Levinson, Donny McCaslin, Bria Skonberg, Grant Green Jr.,

Gordon Webster:

and Chris Potter, to name a few. For the past couple of years, he has also been a member of Grammy-nominated Darcy James Argue’s Secret Society. Gordon’s playing has been showcased in New Jersey at the Bickford Theater, and he is featured regularly at many of New York City’s top jazz venues including Blue Note, The Iridium, Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola, Jazz Standard and BAM.

During the breaks between the recording sessions, I asked Gordon about his relationship with music.

LR: *What influenced you to start playing at such a young age?*

GW: I grew up surrounded by highly skilled musicians, and used to go to sleep listening to chamber music and piano concertos! My father plays viola, and has played with the

National Arts Center Orchestra in Ottawa Canada for the past 35 years. My brother is an esteemed arranger and composer of contemporary jazz music. My mother is a classical pianist, and also teaches young prodigies. When I was around four years old, I begged my parents for piano lessons, and my mother saw I had a great interest in it.

LR: *How did you end up playing for dancers?*

GW: I started to learn to dance Lindy Hop in 2001, while living in Toronto. I just loved that dance, and the community — and they danced to the old jazz. I started playing at a swing dance camp called Swing Out New Hampshire (SONH), but I was there not just for the gig, but as a dancer. I even fell in love with a dancer (Katie is now my wife)! We had these late night dances — there



Jazz and Dance Man

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Story and photos
by Lynn Redmile



Rob Adkins (bass), Dan Levinson (saxophone), Jesse Selengut (trumpet), Matt Musselman (trombone) and Aurora Nealand (saxophone)

were local noise regulations at the camp, so when we played, the volume was low. I would play “Night Train,” at 2 AM, and everyone had to listen and be very quiet and intent. You could hear the dancers’ feet shuffling on the wooden floors to the music...and the connection between the dancers and musicians was tangible. Many of these dancers were young people who wouldn’t listen to jazz otherwise, and yet everyone was completely connected to that music — when we hit those breaks, everyone moved in unison. This was something I’d never experienced when I played in jazz clubs or concert halls — there, audiences were attentive, liked what I had to play, but I didn’t get the energy back from the listening audience in quite the same way as I did from dancers. A magical thing happens during an interaction with an audience when you play for dancers — and I was hooked. I see myself as eclectic...I love the idea of being a pianist who can swing. When I first moved to New York, it was a deliberate attempt to be a contemporary jazz artist like Chris Potter, Brad Mehldau, Kenny Barron, etc. But after 2006, my relationship with a new vibrant young traditional jazz community in the city reconnected me to the music I had encountered in the dance community.

LR: Tell me about your first album, *Blues till Dawn*.

GW: As I said, I didn’t initially intend to make a career out of playing for dancers. But the music chose me, and it just felt so



Gordon Webster with vocalist Naomi Uyama

natural — with NYC as my base, I began to get booked around the Northeast at dance events with a quartet I had formed with a brilliant and soulful singer, Brianna Thomas. I wanted to record an album accessible to listening/radio audience as well as a dance audience — this music appeals to a much wider audience. At the time I was trying to be like Oscar Peterson or Hank Jones, so we recorded an eclectic mix of music, some blues and some faster numbers, and I liked the way the blues pieces turned out.

LR: Why did you choose to record this album live in Rochester?

GW: Groove Juice Swing is an organization I have worked with over the past five years, we have a great symbiotic relationship, and I decided to do a live recording because of the special energy that exists at that event. Live recording is special — and very different

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from doing a studio album where there's no interactive nature. Groove Juice Swing was willing to go the extra mile to help make this project a reality. While all the tunes are danceable, they are ideal for a listening audience too.

LR: *And what's next?*

GW: I really enjoy playing in a variety of musical genres and settings, both on tour and in the city. I want to continue to play for jazz audiences, both dancers and a sit-down audience. There's definitely an audience for traditional jazz — four years ago, I joined forces with Dennis Lichtman who founded Mona's Hot Four (a traditional jazz jam session in the East Village, New York City) and put a piano in there, and really wanted to pursue traditional jazz music of the teens, twenties, thirties, etc. I want to



keep that audience growing — the older trad jazz works have given me a better foundation for the contemporary pieces.

JJ

Gordon's CD will be available from his website, www.GordonWebsterSwings.com, on iTunes and at live shows.

Lynn Redmile is a jazz enthusiast, photographer, swing dancer and writer. She takes every opportunity to enjoy live performances, and preserve and share those moments of joy created by the musicians. www.LynnRedmile.com

Cassidy Holden (guitar), Rob Adkins (bass), Gordon Au (trumpet), Jeremy Noller (drums), Jesse Selengut (trumpet), Matt Musselman (trombone) and Aurora Nealand (clarinet)



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