

JerseyJazz

Journal of the New Jersey Jazz Society

Dedicated to the performance,

promotion and preservation of jazz.

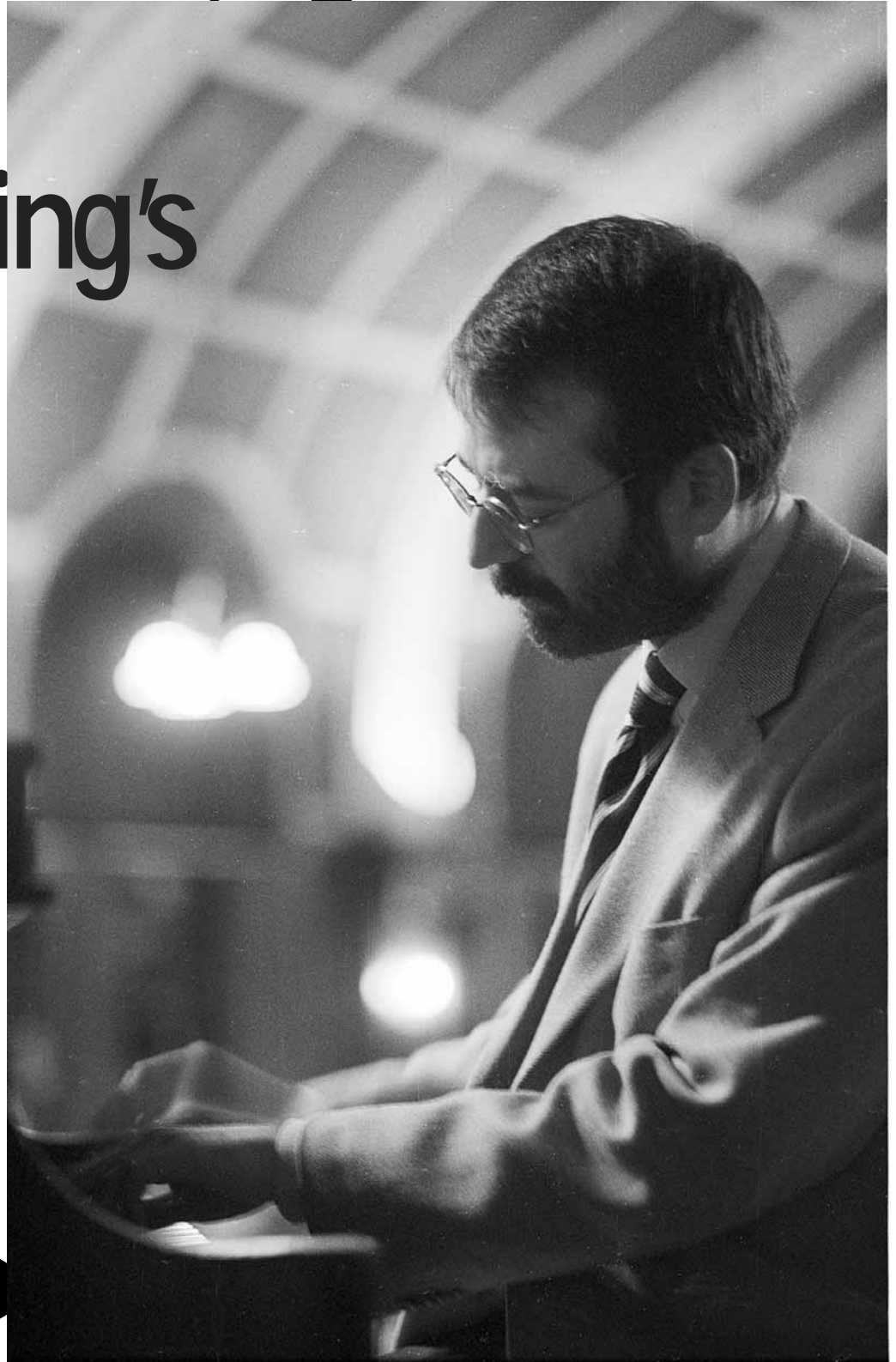
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Everything's Coming Up Rosy!

Rossano
Sportiello set
to perform at
NJJS Annual
Meeting
December 5

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Free for members!

NJJS Annual Meeting

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 5 • CONCERT

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Rossano Sportiello performs at the 2010 Chicken Fat Ball in Maplewood last January. Photo by Mitchell Seidel.

Talking Jazz

A Jersey Jazz Interview with Aaron Weinstein

By Schaen Fox

It is something of a pity that jazz is not much more than a century old. If its history spanned several centuries we might see jazz fans and theater lovers having spirited arguments as to which art form has been dying for the longest time. A positive sign for the vitality of jazz, however, is the quality of many of the younger players emerging today. Prominent among them is Aaron Weinstein, who has performed in this area for several years. Those early appearances that I saw were by a quiet young man who connected with his audience through his music. Recently, however, he has begun to show his sense of humor as well, much to the delight of those who saw him at this year's Jazzfest. Happily for me, his buoyant laughter made for a very relaxed telephone interview this past June..

JJ: What attracted you to music?

AW: My parents are big music fans. Neither of them are professional musicians but they have a great record collection of all kinds of music, everything from jazz to rock and roll and opera. As I was growing up there were always records playing in the house. When I was about seven years old I asked for a violin. I asked my mother, and like any good mother she said no. [Chuckles] But I was fairly persistent and eventually she got me one when I was about nine. They forgot to get me a violin teacher, however, and I started fooling around with it.

JJ: Why the violin?

AW: It was nothing musical. I have an older brother and I thought that the bow could be a wonderful weapon to hit him with and I maybe could also use it to play some music. I ended up not hitting him and playing a lot of music.

JJ: Good thing, considering the cost of a bow.

AW: [Laughs] Yeah. I didn't know it at the time, but a good bow can be more expensive than a bad car.

JJ: Well, do you want to brag about your bow and violin?

AW: No. [Laughs] I have three violins that I use for various recordings and performances and I'm happy with how they all sound. But if anyone wants to donate a Stradivarius to the Aaron Weinstein Musical Foundation I'd be happy to accept it.

JJ: I'd like to know your reaction to Regina Carter's adventures playing Paganini's violin, *The Cannon*.

AW: It was an interesting story. I feel that she has helped elevate the profile of the violin in jazz, perhaps more than any violinist today. She's done wonderful things for the instrument.



Aaron Weinstein performing at Jazzfest 2010. Photo by Tony Mottola.

JJ: You didn't have a reaction to the story of some people fearing that playing jazz on *The Cannon* might damage it in some way?

AW: Oh, I never heard that. That is funny. Well, at one time in the classical music world there was serious prejudice against jazz. From what you're saying it sounds like that prejudice still exists in some places but my experience is that there's a wonderful open-mindedness in the world of violin these days. From time to time I'll do a lesson or a master class for some classical violin players and they're usually very excited to learn how to improvise and such.

JJ: Was your experience in the school system important for your career?

AW: I played in my high school orchestra. That was a very different kind of discipline than I was used to. I was not much of a sight-reader but I fought through it and it was great for me just to be able to play in an orchestra of any caliber and to be introduced to orchestral repertoire. But my musical studies were done outside of the school program for the most part — listening to and transcribing records and things like that.

JJ: What about your Stéphane Grappelli tribute trio in high school?

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AW: Oh, that's ancient history. [Chuckles] My school's jazz band director, James Warrick, was great about helping me explore the music I was interested in. At that time I was enamored of Stéphane Grappelli. It became a bit of a trend to have these Grappelli tribute bands [chuckles] if you can believe it. They popped up in a variety of places all over the country and it seemed like a lot of fun. So I brought the idea to the jazz band director and he let me try it with the guitarist and bassist in the school's big band and we put some music together. It was probably an unhealthy thing for me to do. [Chuckles] It was like giving an alcoholic another drink because I was already so infatuated with Grappelli's playing at that time. I had a great time doing it and Grappelli remains one of my musical heroes, of course.



Aaron Weinstein and Bucky Pizzarelli rehearsing at 2010 March of Jazz.

JJ: Did you ever meet Grappelli?

AW: I never had the opportunity.

JJ: But it was while you were in high school that you won the *DownBeat* competition.

AW: Yeah they liked what we did. I wouldn't put too much weight on that, frankly [chuckles] but it was certainly nice to get that little bit of validation; something that said you are not completely wasting your time, particularly because this happened before I started meeting and performing with many of the jazz masters who I've had the privilege of working with. At that time I was kind of in my own little world, listening to records and trying to make sense of jazz on the violin, often wondering if I was even on the right track. Sometimes I still wonder if I'm on the right track.

JJ: I think the reaction of your audiences that I've been in should be very reassuring to you about that. You went to Berklee on a full four-year talent-based scholarship. That is very impressive, but just what did make you decide to go there?

AW: The full scholarship. [Laughs] Well, that was certainly a part of it. As strange as it may sound, even today it is difficult for the violin to be allowed into some college jazz programs. That was an issue when I started looking at colleges. I knew I wanted to be at a place where I could study music and play jazz on the violin without getting funny looks. So I would have to ask these schools if they would accept a violin into their jazz program. Sometimes they just sent back an E-mail response of one word — "No." So there was a fairly small pool of colleges that would accept me, just on the basis of the instrument and the music I played. That was a wake-up call. Wow. People still don't know that this music can be played on the violin? It seems so goofy for that to even be a question because jazz isn't instrument-specific. It's a language and you can learn that language on any instrument. If you learn the language you can

play the music. It is that simple. That is why you can have a jazz harmonica player or a jazz oboist, I don't know of any, but I'm sure there is one out there. If you can speak the language, you're in.

But Berklee has a fantastic string program that embraced the kind of music I play. It was an interesting experience. There were a lot of things that I loved about the school. It was wonderful for me to really get an academic musical education that allowed me to look at music from a different perspective. Also, I was exposed to musicians that I hadn't been aware of prior. Berklee was a great place in the sense that you could get out of it anything you wanted if you took the initiative to find the right people and ask the right questions.

JJ: Well, speaking of your working with masters, would you tell us about how you connected with John and Bucky Pizzarelli?

AW: I was about 16 and like I said, I was listening to records, mostly of jazz violinists at that time, and I wanted to see if I was on the right track. So I recorded a few songs onto a CD and sent it to a number of musicians and John responded. [Laughs] I couldn't believe it. He called me and he was wildly enthusiastic. He said kinder words about my playing than my playing deserved. [Chuckles] But, it was tremendously encouraging to get a call from someone of that stature who I'd been listening to for years.

Through John I eventually met Bucky. In fact, the first time I met Bucky I was in Jersey and John called to let me know that Bucky was playing at Shanghai Jazz and was waiting for me to sit in. I got the message late in the evening, and I got my butt over to Shanghai Jazz as fast as I could. I walked in just as Bucky was finishing his last song. The people were starting to leave and when Bucky saw me walk in he announced to the audience, "Everyone sit down 'cause we've got more music," at which point he called me over and we played a few songs. I was on Cloud 9. Then he said, "What are you doing on Tuesday?" I said,

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"Whatever you want me to be doing," and he offered me a gig. Since then we have been working together. He has been amazing to me as have all the Pizzarellis. They're like my second family.

Bucky and John more or less shaped my entire musical sensibility. There were others who were certainly influential but no two people have been more influential than Bucky and John Pizzarelli in my musical development in so many regards; repertoire for one. I met Bucky at Shanghai Jazz on a Thursday. He asked me to play with him on the following Tuesday and in those few days between I was panicking, wondering if I was going to know any of the songs. I went back to all of my Bucky Pizzarelli records and was reviewing all the songs and was trying to learn the ones I didn't know. By the time the gig came, I would say I knew maybe half the songs he called. Bucky would start playing some song I didn't know and look over at me and [laughs] I would shake my head and he would smile and finish the tune. Fortunately I didn't do such a horrible job. He kept calling me and for a while, on each gig there would be some songs I didn't know and after the gig I'd go home and learn those songs so I'd be ready on the next one. I remember the first gig where I knew every song he called. I was so thrilled. I felt like I finally knew a few songs.

Also, John and Bucky subscribe to this wonderful idea that the performer should really make an effort to give the audience a nice show because the audience makes an effort to come out to see you perform. I know that sounds basic, but it surprises me to see a lot of musicians who don't really make any considerations for their audience. It's a master class just to watch John interact with an audience. And every time I get to play a gig with him, I'm reminded how much fun it is making music. I recorded a duo record with John for Arbors called *Blue Too*. I don't know if I've ever had more fun in the studio. But my goodness, I've learned so much from [Bucky and John]

JJ: Well then, what was it like for you being on the *Legends* CD with all those great musicians?

AW: That was really the first recording session of that kind I had done and it happened not too long after I first met Bucky and John. Bucky asked me to do this recording with all these amazing musicians.



Aaron performing with Jon Hendricks at Birdland. At right with Janis Siegal.



Bucky and John were there, Skitch Henderson, Jay Leonhart and Johnny Frigo — and I was 17. It was so exciting and terrifying to be up at Nola Studios recording with these people whose records I'd been listening to for so long. I was learning on the job; the big things to the little things, even how to put on headphones in the studio so you can hear yourself comfortably and the rest of the band. I didn't know any of that and I learned the hard way, but it was a thrilling, thrilling experience to take a few days off from high school, come to New York and have that opportunity to record and spend time with musicians of that caliber. The musical aspect was great, but also in between takes I got to hear such wonderful stories. Skitch talking about helping Judy Garland learn "Over the Rainbow" in time for her to start shooting *The Wizard of Oz*; I mean, it gives me the shakes to be in the same room with people who were so close to such integral parts of music history. You see, I could talk about Benny Goodman but the closest I got to Benny was listening to him on record. These guys actually knew and worked with him. It is a whole other level and so for me to be around that was an incredible musical education of a different kind. That is what that session was for me.

JJ: Why did you say you "learned the hard way?"

AW: Oh, just because I made some goofy musical mistakes during that session, mostly because of my ignorance of certain things about working in a recording studio. No one got killed. You live and you learn.

JJ: Was everyone in the studio at the same time or was there some later overdubbing?

AW: No, everyone was there together. I think Skitch's idea for that album was to recreate some of those Paul Whitman violin showpieces. So, there were four violins and a rhythm section all in the studio at the same time.

JJ: OK, what was it like playing beside Johnny Frigo?

AW: Well, I'm originally from Chicago and Johnny lived in Chicago his entire life. He used to play at this beautiful little cognac bar on Monday nights. When I was in middle school or high school and I had a long weekend, my mother or father would take me to this bar to see Johnny play. The place couldn't have fit more than 60 people. I became friendly with Johnny and he would always let me sit in during his set. He was really encouraging. So I had known him prior to the Skitch session, but I had never recorded with him.

He was wonderful during that recording. He knew I was nervous and he would joke around to try to make me comfortable. He went out of his way to make sure I was OK. That's the kind of person he was. I also remember that on the flight back to Chicago I sat next to him as he was doing the *New York Times* crossword puzzle in pen. He would say, "Seventeen across, what is...oh yeah, it is so-and-so. Six down, what is...oh yeah, I know." He finished the whole puzzle this way. I couldn't get a word in. He had an incredible mind. He was a poet, a painter and, of course, a masterful musician. We could talk for hours about Johnny Frigo. He had an amazing life.

I am certainly conscious of how fortunate I am to be around these people. I had an opportunity to get to know Les Paul and play with him a little. It was incredible to play with him, but it was equally thrilling to listen to him tell stories about working with Bing Crosby and Eddie South...just amazing.

JJ: I hope you are recording these stories in some way and not relying on your memory. I used to do that and now I can barely remember, trusting my memory.

AW: [Laughs] I'll keep that in mind — until I forget it.

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JJ: Well, two years after *Legends* you released *A Handful of Stars*. Would you tell us about putting that together?

AW: That was my first recording as a leader. Mat and Rachel Domber from Arbors Records have been so wonderful. I'm really lucky with the number of people who have been encouraging and supportive towards my music and what I am trying to do. The idea of my doing a recording for (their) label came up and Mat let me call the shots; get the musicians I wanted and record the songs I wanted. I had Bucky and John, Houston Person, Nicki Parrott and Joe Ascione. Naturally, I was learning as I was going about how to run an efficient recording session. They don't really write books about that sort of thing. So you have to learn as you do it and that was certainly the case for me. But, we made a record.

I'm critical of my performance. I don't really listen to things that I record very often at all after they are released. When I work on a project, naturally, I'm listening to it a great deal, and when the record is released I'll put it on [laughs] to make sure that everything is as it was planned, but after that I don't really listen to myself just because [Chuckles] I'd much rather listen to Joe Venuti or Zoot Sims. I was very happy with just the fact that I was able to get from start to finish with that record. I was pretty happy with the material and all the other guys were brilliant. I'm proud that they were part of my project. If I were to listen to it now I would say I wish I did this or that, but there's no point to that. You move on to the next one. But it was a wonderful experience to have that opportunity. Mat Domber lets the musicians he records do what they want for the most part because he trusts his musicians and you can't ask for a better musical situation than that.

JJ: Not many actors or musicians can support themselves through their art. Can you recall a moment when you realized that your dream of having a successful career in jazz was actually coming true?

AW: I still question that. [Laughs] Well, I never had the ambition to be a professional jazz musician. [Chuckles] It's just that I love playing jazz and I started getting some gigs playing it and then I started getting some more and fortunately it's all kind of worked out so I play Gershwin and Irving Berlin songs and keep my landlord happy doing it.



Aaron Weinstein and Joe Cohn at NJJS Jazzfest 2010. Photo by Tony Mottola.

JJ: Fair enough. I like your caricature that is on your card and website. Would you tell us where you got it?

AW: After *A Handful of Stars* came out, Nat Hentoff heard the record and liked it. He wrote a very flattering profile of me that appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*. Accompanying the article was that caricature. So I called Ken Fallin, the artist who drew the caricature and asked if I could use it, and he said absolutely.

JJ: I'd like to go back a bit and ask you to tell us more about your times with Les Paul. I assume you saw him at the Iridium?

AW: Yeah, I did. We had a mutual friend, violinist Christian Howes, who told me that if I was ever in New York and wanted to meet Les Paul he would be happy to introduce me. So eventually I had occasion to be in New York and took Christian up on his offer. I met Les and he asked if I wanted to sit in on a few songs. I couldn't believe it. When he called me up on stage I was sufficiently terrified as I imagine was the case with most people who have been in that situation. To me, he was a god, and the only way I was able to get through those couple of tunes without fainting was by constantly telling myself that Les Paul goes to the bathroom like everyone else. I know that's terribly juvenile, but I'm just telling you the truth. Give me a break. I was 17. [Laughs] Anyhow, he liked what I played and said, "Come back any time."

He was always very warm towards me. Any time I went to the Iridium to play with Les I would always go early because it gave me a chance to sit backstage with him and hear these stories about Django Reinhardt, George Barnes and everyone else that he knew. He was walking musical history and he was willing to share his knowledge and he remembered everything, all the dates, places, people and that was wonderful, really an incredible opportunity.

JJ: You have traveled quite a bit in your career. Have you been impressed by any special venue where you have performed?

AW: More than the venue, it is the audience that makes the gig. If you have a great audience in a less-than-ideal venue, I'd take that any day over playing in a magnificent concert hall with a stale audience. I really do feel that a great concert experience relies more on the audience than the venue, and that is another thing I've learned from Bucky. Bucky has an amazing schedule in the sense that he'll be playing Carnegie Hall on Monday, Shanghai Jazz on Tuesday, a retirement party on Wednesday, for Queen Elizabeth on Thursday and a Whole Foods opening on Friday. Just the most diverse range of gigs, and he treats every one like it is Carnegie Hall. That rubs off on the audience, and he has the audience in the palm of his hand because he comes with this amazing respect for them and wants to share this music with them.

I remember after the first gig I did with Bucky I called him the next day, primarily to see if I did an OK job, and we talked about music a little while and he said, "You know, if your grandmother can't understand it, it's not worth anything." He said it simply, but it's a really profound idea. You are playing music for people so do exactly that. Don't play things that are over their heads. He told me once that he thought of himself as a traveling salesman selling these songs. That's an idea that I thought was rather interesting. It shaped the way I think about performing music, the idea of trying to win over the audience to love these songs as much as you do. That's Bucky's philosophy.

JJ: I like that. How do you feel about a noisy audience?

AW: You mean if they are not listening? Well, I don't like it. Anyone would prefer an audience that listens but you deal with it. You keep playing and move on. [Chuckles] But of course, I'd rather they be noisy than dead. [Laughs] I'm kind of hyper-conscious of the audience. Even if someone looks at their watch in the middle of a song I start to think, "Gee, are they not having a good time?" I'm not sure how much people in the audience realize that what they do impacts the folks on stage. Well, I'm speaking only for myself. It may be different for others. Often when I'm playing a concert, I'd look out into the audience and it seemed like there was always one kid whose parents dragged him along who doesn't want to be there, and the kid is making a point of letting me know he doesn't want to be there. And, they always happen to be in the front row. [Chuckles] It's tough because you try to play well and give a good show and then to see someone, even if it's a young kid, give you such negative vibes is really distracting. For a while, I brought along some balloons and should this situation arise, I'd stop the music and I'd make the kid a balloon animal. The kid would usually get embarrassed and then smile for the rest of the show. Problem solved. [Laughs] I didn't get any more proficient than a halfway decent poodle, but for my purpose that was all I needed.

JJ: Do you have any souvenirs from your travels or from other musicians you would care to tell us about?

AW: If I go to a cool place I usually get something to remember it — usually cufflinks, because I'm always wearing cufflinks and one more pair of cufflinks can't hurt. I played at the Django Reinhardt Festival in France. It was in the town where Django lived. Every summer there is a festival where you get genuine gypsy jazz guitar players who live in caravans. I mean real gypsies. They all camp out in this town. It's gypsy jazz guitar heaven. There are guys playing with two fingers. Some of them have mustaches and hair slicked back looking like Django; fascinating to see.

JJ: Well, if we were in your place what kind of art would we see on your walls?

AW: I don't make enough money for art. [Laughs] I've got some photos and have framed some letters on my walls. After *A Handful of Stars* came out I sent it to Kenny Davern and he sent back this really amazing letter. It was very touching and that's up on the wall. I was scheduled to work with him at a jazz festival in Israel and I was so excited because he's one of my heroes. After he wrote this letter, we began talking on the phone and then he goes too early. So, I never got the chance to work with him, but I got to know him a little bit at the end of his life.

I do have some photographs. There is a violinist, Harry Lookofsky, who made some outrageously brilliant records in the '50s. When I was at Berklee I organized a concert celebrating Lookofsky's work and afterwards, Harry's widow sent me a beautiful photo of him which is up on the wall. My mother made some great etchings of some of my favorite musicians, like Chet Baker and Django and I have those up. Oh, I have Joe Venuti's tie up on the wall next to a

picture of him wearing that tie, and Michael Feinstein gave me a vintage jazz violin instructional book. It has a fantastic cover, and that is framed and on the wall; but no Rembrandts. [Chuckles]

JJ: OK, how did you get Joe Venuti's tie?


AW: Well I dug it up from...No, there's a violinist in Seattle named Paul Anastasio who was the only student Venuti ever had. There were others who asked Venuti for lessons and Venuti turned everyone down except for Paul. So Paul had the rare opportunity to spend a lot of time with Venuti during the tail end of his life. When Joe died, Paul acquired all of Joe's personal things, the record collection down to the suits. I spent some time with Paul a few years ago and when I left he gave me one of Venuti's ties. [Chuckles] I love it, but I've never worn it. It's still tied from when Venuti last took it off his neck. Pretty cool!

JJ: Final question; do you know of a film or story that you feel would give us non-musicians some idea of what a musician's life is like?

AW: That's tough. I can think of some films that represent facets of a musician's life or represents certain musicians' lives. Clint Eastwood's biopic about Charlie Parker did a pretty good job representing Bird's life, but I wouldn't watch that to learn about how most jazz musicians live. Warren Vaché was in a film called *The Gig* and there's a lot of reality in that film. I would say there is some truth to all of these movies and if you string all the truths together you get a somewhat accurate depiction. Of course being a musician now is a little different than it was 50 years ago,

but you could have said that 50 years ago. It is always going to be different.

JJ: Well I've really enjoyed talking to you. Thanks for doing the interview.

AW: My pleasure. 



Upcoming area appearances by Aaron Weinstein:

December 20-25: Birdland in NYC with Billy Stritch and Hilary Kole

December 31: Duo with Joe Cohn, First Night Morris

January 8-10: Celebrating Bucky Pizzarelli's 85th Birthday at 92nd Street Y

January 11: Bickford Theatre with Bucky Pizzarelli

Schaen Fox is a longtime jazz fan. Now retired, he devotes much of his time to the music, and shares his encounters with musicians in this column.