

Laid-back set kicks off jazz series

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Photo Bill Wippert/Buffalo News



Jim Tudini, leader of the Jim Tudini Big Band, performed at The News jazz series Sunday on the steps of Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Related photo on the Picture Page, C12.

It was another long and lazy summer Sunday in Delaware Park. A slowly pedaled his bike around the crowded path at Hoyt Lake. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked.

Then suddenly, the man on the bike heard something.

The guttural moan of a baritone sax drifted over the lake, joined shortly by the piercing wail of a trumpeter's chromatic warm-up scale. The biker turned around and pedaled toward the east steps of Albright- Knox Art Gallery, and there it was: hundreds camped out on the grass for the kickoff of this summer's Buffalo News summer jazz series, a free five-week seasonal affair now entering its 25th year.

Sunday's concert featured the Jim Tudini Big Band along with Buffalo's beloved saxophonist and bandleader Bobby Militello. Tudini, a local baritone saxophonist and music teacher at Canisius High School, heads a group of talented musicians whose style fluctuates between Tommy Dorsey and Blood, Sweat & Tears.

And Militello, who serves as the saxophonist and flutist for the legendary pianist Dave Brubeck, made a perfect complement to the band's comfortable and relaxed yet tight sound.

After getting started on a rousing Lester Young tribute, the band settled into a mellow groove that would constitute most of the 2-hour set. The second number, a breezy and atmospheric version of the Gershwin's "S Wonderful," found the brass section providing a gorgeous and understated backup for Militello's alto sax and flute solos, which proved, as expected, to be the main highlight of the afternoon.

Not that Tudini's ensemble didn't provide its own share of highlights, including Tudini himself. On baritone sax, Tudini's handful of solos were always completely relaxed and assured, embodying a kind of laid-back sound that seemed a throatier reincarnation of baritone sax legend Gerry Mulligan.

Though this group has some formidable big band power, especially in the brass section, the band seemed to be at its best on more subdued numbers. A good example was its expert interpretation of "Polka Dots and Moonbeams." Militello, not generally known as a singer, tried his hand at that and a couple of other standards made famous by Frank Sinatra, with his own surprisingly textured and playful vocal interpretations.

The second half of the show started with a touching arrangement by trombonist Phil Sims of the tune "Emily," which, along with the Chick Corea song "Windows," featured some of Militello's most introspective and intriguing flute playing.

Singer Elena Buscarino rounded out the vocal performances with gorgeous interpretation of the Etta James classic "At Last," "Mustang Sally" and a perfectly appropriate and revved-up version of "Summertime." Militello gave up the spotlight to Buscarino on "Summertime" and "At Last," lighting up a cigarette and twirling a towel around his head in gleeful encouragement. But Buscarino, with a solid voice and immediately likable personality, hardly needed it.

Fine solos were also given by John Maguda on trumpet, Joel Siegel on tenor sax and Andy Weinzler on alto. Weinzler, too little featured with the Tudini band, can gratefully be heard at next week's concert on the gallery steps as a soloist with the Gap Mangione Big Band.

In a welcome surprise and a shift away from its mostly low key concert, the group ended with a tight funk tune that had audience members setting down their sudoku books and dancing circles around their picnic blankets.

Not a bad way to spend a Sunday afternoon.