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More than jazz – the John Darst Band

By Barbara Bruce The Independent Dec 14, 2018

Making up the John Darst Band is John Darst, Bob Veltre and (bottom) Chris Long. Known previously at The John Darst Trio, the group has expanded their genre to include not just jazz, but blues, pop, oldies and country.

WHITE MOUNTAINS — Three men, three instruments, three voices, but one reason for playing – their love of music. That’s the John Darst Band — John Darst, lead vocals and guitar, Bob Veltre, backup vocals and lead guitar and Chris Long, bassist and backup vocals. Though known as a jazz trio since 2009, the group has expanded their music genre to include not only jazz but blues, pop, oldies and country from the early 1930 through the 70s — thus the name change to “band.”

For the last six years the group has regularly played at Salt Restaurant in Pinetop which recently closed. They played together, solo and with others – again, for the love of music, and playing together.

Around the age of 12 John said he saw something profound that had meaning for him. “A kid came to school in a cowboy hat and had a guitar and I saw that all the girls went after him. I wanted that,” said John.

Around that same time, John discovered that he liked big band music and jazz – Duke Ellington and Count Basie.

As he headed toward adulthood, John went into the service and on discharge entered the University of Utah and studied jazz. He played in college bands and in different plays in the orchestra pit. In 1974 he headed to Los Angeles to play his music, but came to a sudden realization.

“I realized the caliber of musicians there – there was no way for me to compete and make a decent living. I had done plumbing with my Dad in high school and I had a relative in L.A. who asked me if I would be a plumber’s helper. I apprenticed and did high-end jobs with movie stars as customers and it allowed me to play music anytime I wanted to.”

In 1997 he moved to Arizona with his Gibson 335 guitar and in 2000 started teaching guitar classes at Northland Pioneer College. Being there opened the door for him to chair the Department of Construction Technology in 2002.

With music still his love, especially jazz, John found places and people to play with. “The essence of jazz is improvisation. It is a difficult style to play but it keeps you thinking all the time; you cannot sit back on your laurels, your brain is working all the time. It is instant tune writing as you play. You play with chords rather than the original jazz tune,” explained John.

In 2009 John connected with his current band members and they formed the trio.

When not playing with his band, John plays with other groups as a sub. Recently he played a solo jazz and pop show for a real estate party. He is also on the circuit to play for a Presbyterian Church in Payson who packs the house there with all kinds of high-end players.

Gratefully John said, “I am happy if I can do it once in a while.”

Band member Bob Veltre is from Long Island, New York, and like John, he started playing the guitar early — age 11, influenced by the blues in his early years before embracing jazz. Giving credit to his older brother for his start with the guitar, Bob said, “My older brother taught me how to play; I emulated him and got into my teens and 20s and played the club circuit until 1985 when I put that behind me to write and record.”

By the time he was 30, Bob said he was into computers, making a good living. From New York to San Francisco to Mesa he has been involved in several careers making a living, but music has always been close by. He played two pops concerts with the Phoenix Symphony in 1998 before moving to the White Mountains in 2000. Here he teaches guitar, owns a cleaning business, works as a computer field service technician and plays in the band. He was also Unity of the White Mountains Church director of music for ten years.

Bob said that in the first grade other kids said they wanted to be a fireman or policeman or a nurse, but he wanted to be a house cleaner and he has a house cleaning business. But once his brother turned him on to the guitar, music encircled everything else he has done.

Now expanding their genre, Bob notes, “I enjoyed the challenge of playing difficult jazz tunes. I tried rock, but it was too boring. I want complicated, intricate music that challenges.”

Bob asks himself the hard questions, “What will music be to me in the future? Will I be just learning, working out new arrangements — teaching, learning? I have not recorded in years. I made two CDs. You only have a certain amount of musical energy. At Unity I had six or seven songs to prepare and it would take up my musical energy.”

Whatever musical energy Bob possesses today, he said, “The cool thing is just to sit around and play.”

The third member of the band, is Chris Long from Tempe, whose career and extra curricular activities all relate to music. Chris not only holds a secondary teaching certificate with a K-12 music endorsement, but he plays in the White Mountain Symphony Orchestra (WMSO) and the band.

Chris exhibited musical tendencies as a young child when he wanted to be Louie Armstrong and would mimic the trumpet and also bang on his grandmother’s piano. Today he can play electric bass, guitar, piano, brass, woodwinds and percussion.

Due to some tragic events experienced by his friends in high school, Chris discerned that “it is the things we create that make life worth living.”

Finding a mentor in Professor Grant Wolfe at Mesa Community College, Chris realized his talent, desire and drive to succeed in music. He was encouraged to go for some scholarships and then began playing blues, reggae and Latin music. He did a residency program at Arizona Commission of the Arts and then decided to get his music education at Arizona State University — instrumental music with a string emphasis.

Chris' philosophy is "to follow your path — be a dancer, do gymnastics — love to dance because life is a dance; just go do it." He wants to continue working in music education, be a public school teacher and play with WMSO and the band.

"I would like to do more recording and step it up a bit," said Chris. "Do more traveling and playing and transcend areas of the White Mountains for us."

All three band members say they are not really good at self-promotion but their website tells you how they feel about music with a quote from author and poet Walter Savage Lander: "Music is God's gift to man. The only art of heaven given to earth. The only art of earth we take to heaven..."

More information relating to bookings for the John Darst Band can be found at www.jdarstmusic.com

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