

AimseL Ponti Review

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## Portland Press Herald    Maine Sunday Telegram

The Night Is Young

By AIMSEL L. PONTI November 6, 2008



Canadian fiddler, singer and step dancer April Verch performs Friday at One Longfellow Square in Portland.

It was a crazy, tipsy but well-costumed crowd at Space on Halloween night. I donned a pair of pants with rolls of Smarties candies safety-pinned all over them. Get it? Smarty Pants.

Cleverness aside, the music was the real thrill of the evening, and it began with a spot-on perfect set by Computer at Sea, which superbly impersonated Kraftwerk. Their "Trans-Europe Express" was sublime.

Emilia Dahlin as Cyndi Lauper, backed up by the Tough Cats, was insanely fantastic too. I high-fived Dahlin afterward, and she told me the performance was a childhood dream come true.

The band CAN was well-honored by Conifer, and there was also a hilarious and musically sound takeoff on Tenacious D.

Being that I'm a huge David Bowie fan, my Halloween reached its zenith at half-past midnight when Darien Brahms stepped onto the stage dressed as Ziggy Stardust. She and the local Spiders from Mars killed me.

They started with "John, I'm Only Dancing" and also played "The Man Who Sold the World," "Rebel Rebel," "Blue Jean" and finally "Suffragette City."

Brahms' Bowie blew us all away, and I would happily have listened for another two hours.

Meanwhile, back at the mailbox, I received CDs from the Novel Jazz Septet and Frank Hopkins, and a very cool demo from Isobel. They'll all be getting ink either this week or in the coming ones.

Happiness is when the lid of my mailbox is propped open by a padded envelope. Happiness is excitedly putting a new CD into the home stereo or, even better, into the car player.

And happiness is the fact that I am bringing all of my leftover rolls of Smarties to work this week because even though they frankly don't taste very good, I'm still constantly eating them.

It's late Sunday morning as I sit alone listening to "Novel Ellington and Strayhorn," the new album from the Novel Jazz Septet. The notion that lazy Sundays and great jazz go together like a horse and carriage is nothing new, but the point was happily driven home over the course of 12 songs.

Trombonist Barney Balch and trumpeter Michael Mitchell used original jazz scores from legendary composers Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn and put their own re-interpretative spin on the songs.

Along with standards from the Ellington and Strayhorn songbooks, the CD revisits some of the rarer pieces from both composers.

Along with Balch and Mitchell's horns, the Novel Jazz Septet features Bruce Boege on tenor saxophone, Dave Clark on guitar, Mickey Felder on piano, Mark Macksound on drums and Herb Maine on bass.

These are all seasoned jazz guys, and the result is a sound that made me sway, smile, groove, slow-dance with myself around the living room and play the air snare drums.

Note to self: Bring this disc to work and impress jazz-appreciating boss.

Novel Jazz Septet CD release show. 8 p.m. Saturday. The Opera House at Boothbay Harbor, 86 Townsend Ave. \$10 in advance; \$15 at the door; under 18 \$5. Tickets: 633-5159; [www.boothbayoperahouse.org](http://www.boothbayoperahouse.org)

Fiddler, singer and step dancer April Verch and her band intersect folk, jazz, old-time, bluegrass and roots music.

"Steal the Blue" is Verch's latest album. The track "The Last Greyhound" is a poignant portrait of a young woman who leaves home to find herself only to realize it was not a change in geography she needed, but rather a reminder to her heart of what's really important.

Backed by world-class musicians -- percussionist Marc Bru, Lincoln Meyers on guitar and Cody Walters on upright electric bass -- Verch melds the dozen tracks on "Steal the Blue" into a tapestry of music saturated with her stirring fiddle.

"My Friend Craig" is a spirited instrumental whirlwind. "You Hurt Me All Over Again" speaks of a recovering heart that sometimes slips back into sorrow. "He's Holding Onto Me" skips along with old-time spiritual-revival fervor. Yep, this is yet another CD my mother is going to want to snag from me once I play it for her at Thanksgiving.

The April Verch Band. 8 p.m. Friday. One Longfellow Square, Portland. Tickets \$15 in advance; \$18 at the door. 761-1757; [www.onelongfellowsquare.com](http://www.onelongfellowsquare.com), [www.aprilverch.com](http://www.aprilverch.com)

Described as a post-modern string band, San Francisco's Hot Buttered Rum comes to town on Wednesday for a performance at Empire Dine & Dance.

HBR fuses bluegrass, reggae, folk and jazz in their own take on the Americana sound.

Hot Buttered Rum has opened for Phil Lesh, Bela Fleck, Ben Harper and plenty of others, and also has performed at the Newport Folk Festival, Bonnaroo and the Telluride Bluegrass Festival.

Clearly, they are doing something right. One stop at [hotbutteredrum.net](http://hotbutteredrum.net) drives the point home via many-splendored music samples and the online community of devoted fans they've assembled. With equal footing in both music and the environmental consciousness, HBR is the real deal.

Hot Buttered Rum. 9:30 p.m. Wednesday. Empire Dine & Dance, 575 Congress St., Portland. \$10. Ages 21 and older. 879-8988.

While you may consider yourself a patient person, just remember: The blues won't wait.

That's right. Pam Baker and the SGs will be playing songs from their recently released album, "The Blues Won't Wait," which, by the way, you can pick up at your favorite Blue Moose store or online at [www.pambakerblues.com](http://www.pambakerblues.com).

Baker's been a constant on the local and regional blues scene for longer than I can remember, and she and her band are incapable of putting on a so-so show. They like to get down and dirty and set the house on fire. Stomp over to her Web site or MySpace page, [www.myspace.com/pambakerblues](http://www.myspace.com/pambakerblues), and prepare to be scorched.

Pam Baker and the SGs. 9 p.m. Friday. The Frog and Turtle, 3 Bridge St., Westbrook. No cover.

Aimsele Ponti is a Portland freelance writer. She can be contacted at [aimseleponti@yahoo.com](mailto:aimseleponti@yahoo.com)

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# THE UNSEXIEST MEN OF 2011

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- Fairs and Festivals
- Farmers Markets
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- Music
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- Sightseeing
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- Theater
- Water Stuff

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- Art Events **Classical Music**
- Comedy **Dance**
- General Events **Talks**
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### Places

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- Theaters
- Amusement Parks
- Sightseeing
- Ski - Downhill **\*new**
- Ski - Cross-Country **\*new**
- Adult Education **\*new**

### Editors' Picks

Upcoming editors' picks

**JUN 16**

**EDITORS' PICK**

**Novel Jazz Septet**

Skidompha Public Library **TIX**

184 Main St, Damariscotta, ME [\(view map\)](#)

Like

Those heading north as charmed as I am by Damariscotta might check out the town's Skidompha Public Library, where the **NOVEL JAZZ SEPTET**, comprised of some impressively well-traveled players, romp through cuts from the band's second CD, Rediscovered Ellington and Strayhorn. Some of these guys have been at it for five decades; see them still tearing it up at 7 pm for \$12 (\$10 seniors, \$5 youngsters) at 184 Main St. in Damariscotta. 207.563.5513.

### performers

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Novel Jazz Septet

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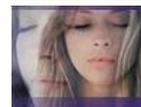
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### More Events at Skidompha Public Library

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Aug 18, 2011 Portland Press Herald- Piece appeared in "GO!" magazine (Maine Today Media Incorporated)

## Face the Music: The jazz is novel, the country is classic, and the fest is loaded

**The venues: The Opera House at Boothbay Harbor, Bayside Bowl and Free Street Parking Lot.**

By [Aimsel Ponti](mailto:aimsel.ponti@mainetoday.com) [aponti@mainetoday.com](mailto:aponti@mainetoday.com)

News Assistant

This week, I'm sending you to Boothbay Harbor for some jazz, to Bayside Bowl for some classic country and honky-tonk, and to a parking lot in Portland for a fundraising music fest featuring a lively cross-section of local acts. With my toenails freshly painted a

seafoam green, I send you happy late-August sentiments and lots of local music. Beware of Pedestrians, a pop-punk student band from the Maine Academy of Modern Music, will play Saturday at the Music & Arts Festival in Portland.

Select images available for purchase in the  
Maine Today Photo Store

**TURN YOUR RADIO DIAL** to 102.9 WBLM every Friday at 8:30 a.m. to hear Aimsel Ponti wax poetic about her top three live music picks for the week with the Captain and Celeste.

**The Novel Jazz Septet**, led by trombonist Barney Balch, is seven hepcats from all over Maine who have been performing together for years. They are huge fans of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, two jazz composers who, between them, wrote more than 3,000 pieces.

For the past few years, Novel Jazz Septet has been on a mission to transcribe some of the pair's lesser-known tunes and shine a modern light on them. Balch is so committed to this project that he periodically visits the National Archives in Washington, D.C., to work with Ellington's original manuscripts.

Fourteen of Novel Jazz's reinterpretations are now available on the CD "The Novel Jazz Septet Live: Ellington and Strayhorn Rediscovered." I've been listening to it all week, and

think that "Lotus Blossom" and "Mood Indigo," among several others, are sensational. It was Ellington himself who said, "The wise musicians are those who play what they can master." The Novel Jazz Septet can rest easy with this knowledge.

*Novel Jazz Septet CD-Release Show. 7:30 p.m. today. Opera House at Boothbay Harbor, 86 Townsend Ave. \$15 in advance; \$20 at the door. 633-5159*

**I don't know** if it was once paradise, but here's one parking lot you're gonna wanna head to, be it in your car, on foot or via a big yellow taxi. Gather one and all on Free Street for the Portland Music & Arts Festival, a benefit for the Maine Children's Cancer Program. It's an all-day festival starring Maine artists and musicians.

Musical acts include Skyler, Pete Miller, Amanda Gervasi, Eric Bettencourt and Sara Hallie Richardson. And that's just for starters. You'll also hear the Maine Academy of Modern Music student band Beware of Pedestrians in all their pop-punk glory.

Headlining the festivities is Lyle Divinsky. He's a former Portlander now based in Brooklyn, and he's coming home with his folk-funk sound. I listened to Divinsky via his Facebook fan page, and he pretty much had me at hello with the song "I Care." You can

take your pick from among the six others he's posted.

Recap: Great cause, great music, five bucks. Go.

*Portland Music and Arts Festival. 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday. Free Street Parking Lot, Portland. \$5; no cover before 4 p.m. [theportlandmusicandartsfestival.com](http://theportlandmusicandartsfestival.com)*

**Classic country honky-tonk** and twang are the dealio at Bayside Bowl as another night of "Too Broke to Be This Drunk" takes over. The Too Broke Band, led by Matt Robbins, will be fanning the flames as guest singer Holly Nunan steps up to the mic. Nunan, from the WBLM Band and The Desires, will be belting out gems from Loretta Lynn and Patsy Cline, with a Rolling Stones or Roger Miller tune thrown in for good measure.

*Too Broke to Be This Drunk. 8 p.m. Saturday. Bayside Bowl, 58 Alder St., Portland. \$5. [baysidebowl.com](http://baysidebowl.com)*

*Staff Writer Aimsel Ponti can be contacted at 791-6455 or at: [aponti@pressherald.com](mailto:aponti@pressherald.com)*



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- Ski - Downhill **\*new**
- Ski - Cross-Country **\*new**
- Adult Education **\*new**

### Editors' Picks

Upcoming editors' picks

# JAN 10

EDITORS' PICK

## Novel Jazz Septet: "Duke Ellington & Billy Strayhorn"

Husson University **TIX**

Gracie Theatre, Bangor, ME [\(view map\)](#)

Way, way up in Bangor, the long-tenured **NOVEL JAZZ SEPTET** offer an inspired set of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn tunes at Husson's Gracie Theatre. It's a haul, but hey, with the wealth of other pleasures up there, my interview subjects on page 5 didn't seem to mind . . . 7 pm, \$10. 207.941.7051.

performers

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Novel Jazz Septet

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# Unearthing Ellington: Audience request leads to historical odyssey for jazz septet



The Novel Jazz Septet, which specializes in little-known songs by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn, perform during a recent concert. The band is made up of Bruce Boege of Northport, saxophone; Mickey Felder of Gardiner, piano; David Clarke of Belfast, guitar; Michael Mitchell of Augusta, trumpet; Herb Maine of Chebeague Island, acoustic bass guitar; Barney Balch of Newcastle, trombone; and Bill Friederich of Northport, drums. Robert Mitchell Photography

By [Christopher Cousins](#), BDN Staff  
Posted Feb. 08, 2012, at 3:34 p.m.  
Last modified Feb. 08, 2012, at 5:21 p.m.

DAMARISCOTTA, Maine — Everything was grooving along as usual for the Novel Jazz Septet until a few years ago when someone requested a Duke Ellington tune no one in the band had ever heard.

For Barney Balch, the band’s trombonist and de facto leader, that moment was the beginning of a years-long odyssey.

“I remember our saxophonist, Bruce Boege, saying we have a collective experience of 200 years of playing jazz and how could we not have heard of this song?” said Balch. “I

realized at that point that there was this gigantic iceberg out there. Most of the Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn tunes people know and love represent about 2 percent of the songs they actually wrote.”

Ellington and Strayhorn, who toured for decades together with Ellington’s orchestra, penned something on the order of 3,500 songs, the majority of them by Ellington. Most everyone with a sweet tooth for jazz knows Ellington’s “Mood Indigo” and “Take the A Train,” but there are thousands of songs cloaked in the passage of decades or, more specifically, stored away in a collection of more than 450 boxes at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C.

Since that fateful audience request several years ago, Balch has been mining the lost songs from the boxes and rearranging them for his jazz septet.

“The joy is in the journey,” said Balch. “It’s become a life passion for me and for the band as well. The goal is to pull these songs together, dust them off and perform them, to get them out there again.”

But Balch said he has discovered far more than just music. Sometimes he stumbles across snippets of what the orchestra’s grueling tour schedule was like for a band of pre-civil rights African-Americans who in some places weren’t allowed to sleep in the hotels where they played or to eat at local restaurants. Balch found grocery lists in the margins of sheet music and scribbled-out orders that the band would send to restaurants with the fairest-skinned person available. He also found a series of aching poems that he suspects were written by Strayhorn.

“Not only was he black, but he was homosexual,” said Balch. “That was a pretty rough combination in those days. Reading those poems made a real impression on me. It was all about the loneliness of being on the road all the time and the difficulties of that life.”

Though Ellington is credited with writing most of his orchestra’s songs, the documents show that he wrote to his band’s strengths. Many of the scores were broken down by nicknames such as “Rabbit” or “Cootie,” who were otherwise known as sax player Johnny Hodges and trumpeter Charles Melvin Williams, respectively.

Toward the end of his 50-year musical career, as Ellington reached his twilight years, he struggled to keep his big band going but never stopped pushing the boundaries of jazz. Balch said the Novel Jazz Septet tries to illustrate the progression of Ellington’s genius with the songs they choose to perform and record.

“The evolution of the work is really worth highlighting,” said Balch. “You can just see how jazz was evolving and these guys were way ahead of their time.”

During performances, Balch usually asks who in the audience saw Ellington or Strayhorn perform. He has noticed that positive responses to that question have dwindled but that the music still captivates people of all ages.

So what would the Duke think of his old songs being performed again? Balch said he has often wondered that as he has sifted through dusty documents at the Smithsonian or labored over a new arrangement of one of Ellington's pieces.

“One obviously never knows what Ellington and Strayhorn would think of it,” said Balch. “In the end, it's about trying to take some of the creativity they started and carrying it into another century.”

*The Novel Jazz Septet, whose repertoire ranges through Ellington, Strayhorn and far beyond, will play at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Skidompha Public Library on Main Street in Damariscotta. [The band's two albums](#) are available for purchase at the website [www.cdbaby.com](http://www.cdbaby.com) — where clips of the tracks can be heard — and at several retail locations in Maine including the Mexicali Blues chain, Grasshopper Shops in Ellsworth and Searsport, the Purple Baboon and Aarhus Gallery in Belfast, Zoots Cafe in Camden and Maine Coast Book Shop and the Skidompha Public Library in Damariscotta.*

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# Novel Jazz Septet to Channel Ellington and Strayhorn at The Grand

April 11, 2011 on [Entertainment](#)

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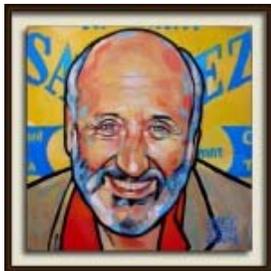
ELLSWORTH — About five years ago, Novel Jazz Septet leader Barney Balch realized they had played yet another piece by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn that none of them had ever heard of before.



The Novel Jazz Septet plays standards, as well as more obscure compositions by Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn. Front row (from left): Herb Maine, bass, and Barney Balch, trombone. Back row (from left): Bill Friederich, drums, Bruce Boege, tenor saxophone, Michael Mitchell, trumpet, David Clarke, guitar, and Mickey Felder, piano.

Tgrcvgrf #Rquvu

### Singer Brings Vintage Style to Grand



Noel Paul Stookey to aid Grand drive



Midday concert to feature cello-piano duo

Novel Jazz is performing at 7:30 p.m. Friday, April 22, at The Grand on the anniversary of Duke Ellington's death.

"Given that our collective jazz experience is about 175 years, this impressed me," said Balch, an oceanographer by day and trombonist the rest of the time.

So Balch started digging and found out that Ellington composed about 3,000 compositions in his lifetime and his musical collaborator/alter ego, Billy Strayhorn, composed another 500.

"I realize that the Ellington and Strayhorn tunes that we all know and love make up about 2 percent of their life's work," he said.

So Balch went to Washington, D.C., and made a special request at the Smithsonian Institution to work in the Ellington Archive, specifically in the Ellington and Strayhorn collection, which included 450 book boxes of music.

He emerged with recordings plus original scores that he thought would make good Novel Jazz music and arranged the big band pieces for his smaller group.

Trumpet player Michael Mitchell also has located many unique Ellington and Strayhorn tunes and arranged them.

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# Lucky Clark On Music: Novel Jazz Septet

cm [www.centralmaine.com/2017/10/26/lucky-clark-on-music-novel-jazz-septet/](http://www.centralmaine.com/2017/10/26/lucky-clark-on-music-novel-jazz-septet/)

If jazz is your thing, may I make a suggestion? Head down to the Jewett Hall Auditorium on Sunday, Oct. 29, for a concert featuring Novel Jazz. The septet is made up by Barney Balch (tenor, alto and soprano trombone); Mike Mitchell (trumpet, cornet and flugelhorn); Bill Manning (drums); Herb Maine (bass); David Clarke (guitar); Mickey Felder (piano); and Sean Potter (alto sax). This band has dedicated themselves, as stated on their webpage, to “keeping the music of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn alive and swinging.” Seeing this was a new group for me, I wanted to find out more and at the end of a marathon email session, Barney Balch called me via Skype from Israel where he was traveling.

Q: I understand that you are overseas to give a keynote speech at an international oceanic climate change symposium, correct?

## Concert info

Novel Jazz

Time: 2 p.m.

Date: Sunday, Oct. 29

Venue: Jewett Hall Auditorium

Address: University Drive, Augusta

Tickets: \$10 adults, \$5 students

Phone: 621-3551

Websites: [concertsatjewett.com](http://concertsatjewett.com), [mainejazz.net](http://mainejazz.net)



Search photos available for purchase: [Photo Store](#) →

Balch: Well, it's not exactly a climate change symposium, but yes, it is a meeting between the host institution in Eilat, Israel, and the Dalhousie University, which is in Halifax. And since I do a lot of oceanographic work between Portland, Maine, and Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, they figured I'd be a good one to talk about it, and I will indeed be talking about climate change, but the meeting itself is about a broader marine topic than that.

Q: When I discovered you were out of the country it made me wonder if you have the opportunity to check out the local music scene in there?

Balch: Well, we got to hear some music yesterday but I've got some time before the meeting so my wife and I are traveling around the country and we did get the chance to hear some music and it was pretty cool. It was more folk music than jazz but definitely music makes the experience.

Q: I know I should be talking about your concert at Jewett Hall Auditorium, but I really find this side of your life very fascinating, to say the least.

Balch: Well, as I like to say, the music balances my left brain and my right brain. My day gig as a scientist is much more right brain and the music part of me helps balance out the left brain.



ON  
MUSIC  
*Lucky Clark*

Q: I love it! So let's pursue that left brain for a while and talk about your upcoming gig in Augusta. Now is your group's name pronounced "no-VEL" or "NOV-el"?

Balch: Well, we get both actually because Rich Tozier on Maine Public Radio for years has called us "no-VEL" Jazz Septet and I've always referred to us as "NOV-el" Jazz Septet, and the reason being that early on in the band's history we started doing a regular thing at the Skidompha Public Library in Damariscotta, (it's) nice to keep the chops going during the long winter period, (and) they were very kind to allow us to perform in their atrium because there were wonderful acoustics there. So back when my daughter was all of six years old I asked her, "What shall we call this band?" and she said, "Well, something having to do with a library — how about 'novel?'" and that's the honest-to-God truth.

Q: That's neat! Now it says on your bio sheet that your group's specialty is the music and history of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn.

Balch: Yeah, and that goes back to that library where one of the band members called out a Duke Ellington song that I had never heard of and I asked the silly question which turned out to start this whole adventure: "Gee, I wonder how many songs Billy Strayhorn and Duke Ellington wrote?" And the answer to that question turns out to be about three thousand compositions. I had no idea that they were that prolific.

Q: Neither did I. That's amazing.

Balch: Well, I did some research and found out that the Duke Ellington collection is at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. at their Museum of American History. They have 450 book boxes of music that comprise this collection which was granted from Duke's son Mercer Ellington after Duke's death. I asked and received permission, with certain conditions and some training on how to handle historical documents, and went down there to study those compositions. I was able to hold the original versions of "Mood Indigo" and "Take the A Train." So that combined my love of research and my love of music. That's how it all started.

Q: What an incredible undertaking that must have been.

Balch: Well, I listened to old recordings and discussed it with the band so when I went down there I was armed knowing exactly which book box and which folder within the book box I needed to find the particular tunes I wanted to study. That way I could be more efficient in working there. The actual arrangements and stuff doesn't happen until once I'm out of there. And it's a bit of work that goes into making arrangements of those compositions because we're arranging from an 18-piece orchestra to a seven-piece band. That has its own challenges. Usually the way our season goes is we perform during the summer months into the fall and then the schedule slacks up and we start working on arrangements. I'm not the only one that does arranging, other members do, too. Then somewhere in January or February we get together to do a first cut of the tunes and then we think about how we're going to perform them. We do not necessarily perform the tunes exactly as they were performed on the recordings from 1938, for example, but we think about ways we could present it that might bring it up to date harmonically into the 21st century. So we'll dust them off, dress them up and give them a new sound, which I think either of those two gentlemen would really appreciate. It's pretty exciting in that respect.

Q: Now have you done this Concert at Jewett series before?

Balch: No, I've been wanting to do the Jewett concerts for a couple of years now so we're really excited about it.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to pass on to the folks reading this article about your venue debut there in Augusta?

Balch: Well, I think the main point about this is that while we focus on Ellington and Strayhorn, we also do tunes in the show by members of the Ellington orchestra, as well. Also, I'd like to mention that every tune has a story about it, and our shows mix in the history of the music to introduce each tune — that is an important part of the show.

Lucky Clark has spent 45 years writing about good music and the people who make it. He can be reached at [\[email protected\]](#) if you have any questions, comments or suggestions.

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