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JUNE 10, 2011

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Jazz on the Chesapeake Festival to Pay Tribute to Charlie Byrd

On Labor Day Weekend 2011, the Eastern Shore will usher in its own jazz festival, under the new name, Jazz on the Chesapeake. As a musical entity, the program first edged onto Easton's cultural agenda in 2009 with a concert by legendary jazz pianist, Monty Alexander. That initial success evolved at prestissimo speed into a fully fledged jazz festival by 2010, with Alexander, then, lending his name to the festival and assuming the role of artistic director. All the while, Chesapeake Chamber Music, long-recognized as a producer of top rate musical performances, proudly nurtured the jazz neophyte. That same cast of talent will produce the 2011 Jazz on the Chesapeake presents The Monty Alexander Jazz Festival and include a tribute to the late Charlie Byrd, who thrilled mid-Atlantic audiences for decades with his jazz and classical guitar.

By many standards, Chesapeake Chamber Music took bold steps to grow the jazz festival so quickly. Al Sikes, Chairman of the Chesapeake Chamber Music Jazz Committee, attributes that pace to "unbridled enthusiasm." He says, "That first audience in 2009, which drew heavily on chamber music lovers, gave Alexander two standing ovations, one at intermission, and the

other at the finale.” The Jazz Committee read those extraordinary signals as imperatives to move-ahead in a bigger way.

Though this year’s full weekend program has not been completely finalized, it was Monty Alexander’s idea, as artistic director, to pay homage to Charlie Byrd in 2011. He reminisced that many moons ago, he accompanied Charlie Byrd. Alexander is undoubtedly sensitive to the joy a Byrd spotlight will bring to the legion of Byrd fans in the Chesapeake region.

Though few would disagree that the many consider chamber music and jazz to be poor bed fellows, Chloe Pitard, president of the board of Chesapeake Chamber Music, dismisses any suggestion that the Board of Directors’ decision to support jazz was revolutionary. “We’ve thought about jazz for a long time, ever since Rush Moody, a past president of the Board, seeded the idea years ago.” She notes that jazz and chamber music share the same definition --- a small group of musicians, each playing different parts, without a conductor. She adds, “Jazz may present a new genre and different style of music, but it easily fits our mission to present Shore audiences with superb music performed by world class musicians.”

Rush Moody picks up on the Chesapeake Chamber Music’s path to jazz, speaking broadly of the group’s interest in expanding its footprint of bringing music to the community. “When you’re doing something good for the community,” and he sees music as a valuable civilizing influence, “you want to do more.” He also credits serendipity and interpersonal chemistry as catalysts of the new jazz emphasis.

Finding time on a community's busy calendar is never easy. So when the Board discovered that the Avalon Theatre was dark on Labor Day weekend – an ideal time for a jazz happening! – its members accepted that information as another “go-ahead” signal.

Reflecting on chemistry vibes, Moody recalls a sequence of relationships, starting when he and his wife, Anne, acquainted their friends, Marty and Al Sikes, with chamber music. In turn, the Sikes, who are life-long jazz lovers, encouraged the Moodys to follow their inclinations to pursue jazz. That encouragement paved the way to bring Monty Alexander to Easton. Finally, it was the spontaneous warmth from Shore audiences that won Alexander over to helping the Eastern Shore community build a jazz tradition.

The Jazz Committee takes pride in the fact that the festival gives Easton an opportunity to bring “emerging jazz artists” before appreciative audiences. This is not unlike what the Chesapeake Chamber Music Competition does for outstanding young chamber musicians. In most metropolitan jazz capitals, the spotlight is reserved for musicians who have been playing for decades, cutting the performance time of budding artists.

The 2010 Monty Alexander Festival gave 18-year old Grace Kelly, an amazing alto saxophonist who is hailed as a rising star in the jazz world, a chance to feel the unbridled enthusiasm of the Festival's audience. Kelly, who was accompanied to Easton by her father, went out of her way to discuss this personal perspective of her Easton performance. Even Alexander, a world-class musician, is impressed by the quaint charm of Easton and its welcoming arms.

For further information about Jazz on the Chesapeake, visit ChesapeakeChamberMusic.org or call the CCM office at 410-819-0380.

CUTLINE: Pictured is alto saxophonist Grace Kelly who appeared at the 2010 Monty Alexander Jazz Festival.

