

BEST of D.C.

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Best Jazz Compatriot

Chris Grasso

This February's Mid-Atlantic Jazz Festival featured a vocal competition in an *American Idol*-style format: Contestants sang their songs to a panel of three judges, who offered live comments and critique. The competition went well, but there was some minor confusion about the procedure. Would emcee Wes Biles come on after the performances to reintroduce the judges, or would the floor get thrown straight to the panel after the singer was done? When the second contestant, Polly Gibbons, finished, everyone onstage hesitated, unsure of how to proceed.

 Photograph by Darrow Montgomery

Then the leader of the accompanying trio, 50-year-old pianist Chris Grasso, made a judgment call. He jumped from his piano bench, grabbed the lead microphone, and said, "I think we're going to go right into judges' comments, OK? OK. Thank you."

That's Grasso in a nutshell. He's both a consummate musician and a consummate professional—sensitive and tasteful on one hand, pragmatic and take-charge on the other. It's made him a figure of respect and outright adoration among his colleagues in the D.C. jazz community. "Chris stands as a top pianist in D.C.," says singer Lena Seikaly. "He's very engaged in musical situations, leaves very little to chance. But he's not just a great musician; he takes care of musicians—on and off the bandstand."

It's a remarkable position for someone who describes his own entry into the scene as "kind of a fluke." Born and raised in Syracuse, N.Y., Grasso went to college as a classical pianist but minored in English. He came to D.C. upon graduation in 1986 to cover the Supreme Court for a trade journal, which whetted his appetite for law school; off he went to the University of California's Boalt Hall, then returned to the District to work at a downtown law firm.

But Grasso also kept playing piano. One day, his then-partner, also a pianist, found among Grasso's sheet music a fake book (a collection of jazz standards that gives just enough of the songs' basic notation for the pianist to "fake it"). "He asked me all these questions about it, got me to show him the songs," Grasso recalls. "And then a friend of ours, the trumpeter Kevin Cordt, got us all playing together, and it just developed from there. It was this random little hobby that I just got really interested in."

Grasso's partner died in 1995; his grief helped him understand that he didn't want to practice law anymore. He began slowly shifting his livelihood into that of a full-time musician. "I went from being on the partner track to being a part-timer—it was about a five-year transition," he says. The transition ended when he lucked his way into a steady gig at the Stage Door, a now-defunct bar in Logan Circle.

He also lucked his way into a long run of directing music in local hotel bars and lounges. ("I've never really been as successful at pounding the pavement—which I have done, mind you—as when things happen serendipitously and organically.") His current partner, a police officer, helped him get a private event gig at the Washington Plaza Hotel, which led to him taking charge of music programming at the Henley Park Hotel, then the Mandarin Oriental, and finally the Madison, where he ended his residency in November. He also freelances, plays biweekly at a restaurant in Lanham, Md., and instructs the D.C.-area Vocal Workshop. It's something of a joke among local musicians how much Grasso works.

Weekend nights at the hotels allowed him to work with a wide spectrum of D.C. musicians—instrumentalists and vocalists alike. He enjoys working with both, and the feeling is mutual, because he knows how to vary his approach. "With a vocalist, it's about finding a way to steer someone to make them even better than they might already be," he says. "With instrumentalists, I want to plan, instruct, control, as little as humanly possible. The enemy of great musical experience is expectation and planning." That philosophy serves him well in performances with his trio (which includes bassist Zack Pride and drummer Quincy Phillips) or in intimate duo settings with players like bassist Tommy Cecil or saxophonists Lyle Link and Marshall Keys.

But Grasso is especially at home among vocalists. A lifelong lover of jazz vocals, he loves to accompany them, unlike many jazz pianists. "He's absolutely the best vocal accompanist in the city," Seikaly says. "Chris is very sensitive with vocalists, with knowing what they need and want. He's easy to communicate with, wordlessly. He's constantly locking eyes with you."

That pragmatic sense sets Grasso in a kind of paternal role for the whole jazz scene, and for singers in particular. "I have lots of situations thrown at me where I have to get things together and move quickly, and he's always there to make me feel better about these high-pressure situations," Seikaly says. "He's my rock."

—Michael J. West

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