All That Jazz

By: ERIC SNIDER

This October, The Clearwater Jazz Holiday Continues Its Eclectic Ways With Headliners Bonnie Raitt, The Avett Brothers and Esperanza Spaulding

For the first time in its 33-year-history, the Clearwater Jazz Holiday is changing admission, but in return for the $10 ticket price it's offering a well-stocked lineup that will appeal to a wide range of tastes. Bonnie Raitt headlines opening night, Thursday, October 18. This year, the blues-rock artist and member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame released her best album in a couple of decades, "Slipstream."

On Saturday, October 20, 27-year-old singer/composer/bassist Esperanza Spaulding—who won the 2011 Best New Artist Grammy—closes the marathon day. Litchie, glamorous and multi-talented, she was the booking coup of the fest. "We had our sights on her for a couple of years and finally it all came together," says Bobby Rossi, Entertainment Director at Ruth Eckerd Hall, which books the headliners for CJH.

The festival closes Sunday, October 21 with perhaps its most significant departure from the jazz idiom ever: The Avett Brothers. The North Carolina band is a melancholy American act that's a formidable draw in the neo-hippie, jam-band scene. "I did not support the Avett Brothers at first, and I still don't get it," says Allen Sams, the jazz keyboardist who heads the Holiday's booking committee. "But what I do get is, they have a huge fan base and the park is gonna be packed."

CJH organizers instituted the pay-ticket—multi-day passes and VIP packages are also available—due to a deep rollback in corporate sponsorships and donations in the wake of the Great Recession. Ten bucks is a bargain, but it also poses a risk. "It's something the foundation didn't take lightly," says Gary Hallis, the event's Executive Director. "In fact, we've been looking at charging for a number of years."

The non-profit Clearwater Jazz Holiday Foundation recognizes that it can't expect to draw the same numbers with an admission charge. They anticipate some attrition—although declined to speculate how much—from the roughly 50,000 people who have attended CJH annually. But the organizers researched other festivals that had transitioned from free to a pay ticket and heard a number of success stories.

Scheduling talent for the festival has long been a collective effort and is thus naturally subject to agendas, different tastes and tricky logistics. The booking committee was well in the process when Sams grew uncomfortable with the direction. "I told them, 'You're going to hate me for this, but I need $20,000 more,'" he recounts. "I looked at the lineup and we didn't have any jazz to speak of. Smooth jazz doesn't count. It's fun and that's great, but we needed to make a solid jazz statement."

With Spaulding installed as the Saturday night headliner, Sams and his cohorts were able to make the dominoes fall. Critically acclaimed vocalist Kurt Elling, who deftly interprets standards and pop material with his clastic baritone and unwavering commitment to swing, is Saturday's penultimate performer. He'll be preceded by saxophonist Tia Fuller, a member of pop star Beyoncé's band who fronts her own straight-ahead jazz ensemble.

That leaves Friday, October 19 as a showcase for funky, spanky smooth jazz. That portion will be headlined by St. Petersburg native Mindi Abair, who has gained international popularity, along with a couple of special guests, guitarist Jeff Golub and David Pack, former singer/guitarist for the rock band Ambrosia.

In all, this year's Clearwater Jazz Holiday packs substantial star power to go along with high-quality music and a something-for-everyone vibe. "A lot of festivals, when they lose sponsorships, tend to skimp," says Rossi of Ruth Eckerd Hall. "Not this one."