

# Playing in Time

They'll never be stars, but for one week in summer, jazz equals life **By Carlo Rotella**

*Photographs by Jerome De Perlinghi*

SETH ARENSTEIN, a 42-year-old editor of cable industry publications and amateur trumpeter from Arlington, had always played from sheet music. He had shied away from jazz, and especially from improvisation. Not that there wasn't any improvisation in his life. Putting out a magazine, plus a daily update known for its barbed acuity, required a certain ability to be creative within the structure imposed by journalistic form and deadlines. But when it came to music, his first love, he had left the improvising to his younger brother, Michael, a 40-year-old otolaryngologist from Bethesda, who was also a gifted jazz pianist. Seth played and listened to classical music, mostly. He had had a solid early musical education in childhood lessons and school bands, then he had put down the trumpet in his twenties as he embarked on his career, but he had taken up the instrument again in his late thirties to join an amateur orchestra. He had returned to his first love as a hobby, but it was more than that: He lived more deeply, more vividly, in music. When he could not play, he listened; when he could not listen, there still was music in his head—phrases, fragments, bits and pieces of beauty sounding in the mind's ear.

On a Thursday evening last summer, Seth found himself on the stage of Kilbourn Hall in front of an audience at the world-famous Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y., with a moment of truth upon him. He was part of a small jazz group churning through "Autumn Leaves," a standard. The preceding soloist played his closing notes, the crowd applauded and subsided, the rhythm section drove into the start of another chorus, and there came an expectant pause into which it was Seth's turn to step. It was either a dream come true or a sheet-music player's version of the actor's nightmare. He considered for a long moment, trumpet raised to his lips.

Seth and his brother had arrived in Rochester the previous Sunday for a week at the Tritone Jazz Fantasy Camp. Michael, a veteran player and a soulful improviser, was looking forward to studying with accomplished teachers and to a good vacation. Seth, though, described himself as "a blank slate" when it came to improvisation. Four days of master classes, theory classes, small combo and big-band rehearsals, open-mike jams, lectures on jazz history and style, recitals by the professional musicians who taught at the camp, practicing, late-night hanging out, and conversation about jazz with teachers and fellow campers had inscribed on Seth some principles to follow. He was anxious about playing a solo, but trying to improvise no longer made him feel—as it always had before—as if he were adrift in a trackless desert of jazz spontaneity, where the very possibility of pursuing your

**Brothers Michael Arenstein, seated, a physician, and Seth Arenstein, an editor, at the Tritone Jazz Fantasy Camp.**



inspiration in any direction made it almost impossible to get your bearings or go anywhere at all.

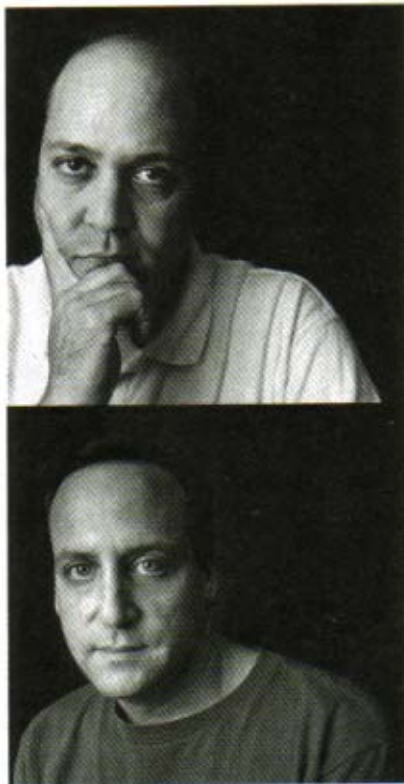
Now, soloing, he departed from the melody into unfamiliar territory. He played a simple figure, repeated it, varied it, easing without hurry into an understated, Miles Davis-inflected solo that was plain but musically correct. He had not memorized it in advance, and it was different from the one he had played in dress rehearsal; he had improvised it. The solo lasted no more than 40 seconds, but it formed the climax of an important week in his musical life.

FANTASY CAMPS HAVE FLOURISHED in recent years, serving intertwined impulses especially well developed among men of the baby boom generation: to revisit one's youth, spend disposable income and mount a brief excursion along the road not taken. The most numerous and established camps are run by sports teams; staffed by coaches and retired athletes, they often feature cameos by active players. Baseball fantasy camps came first and still dominate the field, but there are others for basket-

**'I knew ... there was a certain amount of innate talent he was blessed with,' says Seth of his brother, 'and I wasn't.'**

ball (including those for women run by WNBA affiliates), football, hockey, and other sports from motorcycle racing to luge. There have been music fantasy camps for marching band, rock, guitar playing, guitar making, country music, folk, and being Christina Aguilera or someone closely associated with her. There have been camps dedicated to pro wrestling, cooking, brewing beer, monster trucks, bull riding, radio. At covert ops camp, mild-mannered regular folks make document drops and stage hostage rescues with paintball guns.

Besides offering amusement and a vacation spent *doing* something—rather than idling expensively in a less than satisfying way, as so many hardworking people do during a much-anticipated week off—fantasy camp can provide an occasion to consider what it would be like to have taken another road in life. For example, Michael Arenstein, the ivory-tickling ear, nose and throat doctor, might have scratched out a living as a musician had he been willing to risk steep downward mobility. In other cases, the camper engages in pure fantasy, playacting an alternative life without any supporting evidence of potential or aptitude for it. Either way, having spent a week living a dream,



**Seth, top, wasn't good enough for a music career; Michael played professionally for a year.**

the camper can return, satisfied and perhaps even relieved, to the home, career and security of real life. That dynamic of departure and return helps to give fantasy camp its double-edged atmosphere of possibility and regret.

"I'M BOB DEROSA, pseudo-musician." The Sunday evening assembly that opened the Tritone camp had come to order in a big rehearsal room and recording studio in the Eastman School's main building. Returning campers had hugged one another and their teachers, then found seats; first-timers fidgeted expectantly. DeRosa, a big, friendly bassist from Rochester who passed his workdays as a vice president of marketing for American Fiber Systems Inc., was in charge of introducing the campers to one another and to their teachers. Starting a jazz fantasy camp was DeRosa's idea, which he brought to Fred Sturm and Jim Doser, professional teachers of music at Eastman. The three friends founded Tritone, which, in its fourth summer, offered two week-long sessions: one at Eastman, one at a resort in Wisconsin.

As a first order of business, DeRosa introduced "some real musicians," the camp's teaching faculty, who took up their instruments and launched into Thelonious Monk's "Well You Needn't." They were pros—not stars, but respected teachers (most of them on the Eastman faculty) and first-rate players who could hold their own in fast company. They knocked off a short set of standards, crackling with expert musicianship but not showing off. The campers looked impressed, scared, excited. After a while the band stood down and Janet Planet, the voice teacher, came on to sing a couple of showstoppers, accompanied by Gene Bertoni on guitar. The singers bent toward her in their seats like sun-seeking plants.

Of the 47 campers, who each paid \$650 in tuition for the week (room and board was an additional \$360), about half had been to Tritone in previous years, and perhaps two-thirds were from out of town. Among the campers, there were two guidance counselors, a college administrator, two students; various business people, from small-business owners to corporate executives; three government officials, a judge, an FBI agent; two journalists; a handful of physicians, a speech pathologist, a psychologist, a psychotherapist; a chemist, a "gizmologist," a software engineer, other sorts of engineers; and two artists. There were also several retired people, finally free to devote themselves full time to music; most of them would spend the rest of the week walking around with beatific expressions on their faces. Each camper (except the singers) was assigned to a small combo and a larger ensemble. Combos would give a concert on Thursday evening, ensembles on Friday. They had four days to get ready.

FRED STURM had more than half of the campers in his ensemble, a very big band that included most of the beginners and few of the top-level players. Three rows of horns, rotating

Carlo Rotella's next book, *Good With Their Hands*, will be published in the fall.

crews of pianists and drummers, a small civilization. Much of his task would be to convince them that they could play together at all. At the first rehearsal on Monday, Seth Arenstein looked around from his seat in the third row and thought, "My God, this is going to be impossible. The band's too big, we only rehearse an hour a day, and we've got less than a week."

"I've got an ambulance and a nurse ready," said Sturm, raising his hands to cue the first number. "So here we go. We go 'til we crash." As the band roared into the head, he called out, "Watch your key signature, everybody, or I'll kill you." His smile caught and spread throughout the room, so that soon almost everybody was wearing a goofy, triumphant look.

Having taught all manner of students, from hellbent Eastman School pre-professionals to hormone-occluded middle-school band members, Sturm has a special talent for getting musicians who have good cause to be unsure of themselves to deliver their very best. He soon had the ensemble loosened up. When he finally called for volunteers to take a solo, a couple of camp veterans went first, then first-timers began taking the plunge. As each soloist played, the big band vamping gigantically in support, Sturm sought eye contact with the next prospective soloist.

He made an expectant, encouraging face at Seth, who, still playing with the rest of the trumpet section, looked up from the sheet music to shake him off with a regretful grimace that managed to communicate a whole thought: *Not yet, but thanks for asking.*

WHEN HE WAS YOUNGER, Seth thought he would pursue a career in music. He was president of his junior high school band, first trumpet, soloist, he even conducted. He and his brother regularly won the school band's awards for best instrumentalist. Their parents had always encouraged them to play—their father, in fact, had told them when they were little boys that they had to take lessons for at least a year before they could decide for themselves whether or not to pursue music any further—but when Seth reached high school his parents told him that he was not gifted enough to play professionally. It's a good hobby, they said, but it's not a life, it's not a career. He might have a good ear and nice tone, he might be as competent and as committed as his band teachers could wish for, but that would never be enough for him to make a living from music. Seth had to



**Guitarist Gene Bertoncini** rehearsing with his combo; above; Pamela McGaan, left, tries out her vocal chops, with Bob DeRosa, who helped start the Tritone camp, on bass; Eastman School of Music teacher Fred Sturm, on trombone, keeps his combo on track, including 87-year-old tenor saxophonist Carle Porter at right.



start thinking about college and the prosaic business of getting on in life.

Michael, though, had a gift. From an early age, he could sit down at the piano and play what he heard. "I knew pretty early that there was a certain amount of innate talent he was blessed with," says Seth, "and I wasn't. It happens. You have to face up to that. I knew enough about music to see that he was so good that he could even fake out his teachers, just play by ear instead of learning the piece." So Michael went two steps further in



When Fred Sturm led his big band in concert, the sheer volume of blowing and aspiration carried everyone away with it.

music than his older brother could. Even though he already had medical school in mind, Michael majored in music at college, and he played professionally full time for a year before settling into a doctor's life without too many regrets.

ALSO ON THAT MONDAY, in a small room high up in Eastman's annex building, Gene Bertoncini's combo had its first rehearsal. These were some of the camp's best players, guys who could play gigs for money all the time if they wanted to. Warming up in a loose circle, waiting for the drummer to get ready, somebody started fooling around with the melody of "Out of Nowhere" and others picked it up. Bertoncini, a short, gray-haired Bronx Italian guitar genius with an old-fashioned stoopside manner, said, "Yeah, let's play something, let's play that tune," and they were off at a moderate swinging pace. A trumpet-playing Canadian engineer took a robust solo, then a music teacher from Fayetteville, N.Y., took a flashier one on tenor saxophone, laying on the fancy runs and effects. A deputy administrator in the Federal Insurance and Mitigation Administration from Silver Spring played a complex, chordal guitar solo. Then Michael Arenstein took his turn.

Michael's playing was not as imposing as the music teacher's or the federal actuary's, not as busy; it was more relaxed, more direct, more elegant. The word for that quality is "musicality," a kind of command that sounds like sophisticated ease rather than heroic strain. A key in the piano's high range was broken, producing a tinny clunk when touched, but Michael played it anyway, smiling at the ugliness of the noise, making it all into music.

They sounded good, not like dabblers trying to get through it but like musicians making music. When it was done, Bertoncini said, "Yeah, let's take it on the road," and the

campers smiled and nodded, trying to be cool about how pleased they were.

Then Bertoncini got down to business. "We played that pretty good," he said, "but all—most—of us had trouble with one chord change. Let's work on that." He had the soloists, except Michael (who had gotten it right), go at it again, patiently moving from one to the next until each of the offenders had worked out a solo line that engaged the detail rather than glossing over it. Bertoncini urged them to remember their solutions. "It's no sin as a jazz player to look at the changes and work out a lick," he said. The music teacher, who had fudged the change the first time under cover of a frilly run, said contritely, "If you have chops, you can fool people on the changes, but I want to *play* the changes, not fool people."

THE EVENING OPEN-MIKE jams took place in a cool, green, glass-enclosed atrium across the street from Eastman. The sun set in the windows behind the bandstand; campers trickled in, dispersed themselves among the chairs and tables scattered about the space, and unpacked their instruments. A trio struck up "Take the A Train." A retired engineer played dense, forceful piano, turning out thick ropes of notes as he rolled from side to side on the bench like a ship in heavy seas. A college-age drummer and a retired corporate executive on bass formed the rhythm section. After a couple of choruses, a rock-jawed FBI agent straight from central casting joined in on tenor sax and took a solo. He timed it perfectly, strolling from the margin to the center of the room and leaping into the little pause between choruses.

A new crew came on to play "Blue Monk." A sales assistant from Tokyo took an appropriately Monkian piano solo. A

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black-bearded psychiatrist from Otawa—who, in white shorts and black socks, resembled a sorcerer on his day off—played a sinister clarinet solo, fearless and original, if not always in tune. An 87-year-old tenor saxophonist named Carle Porter, bent at mid-back so near to double that the nether curve of his instrument almost scraped the ground when he played, took an enthusiastic turn in the center of the room.

Seth Arenstein, watching from a seat at the back of the room, muttered, “I gotta get in there,” but his trumpet stayed in its case. He told himself that he wasn’t ready, that it was still only the first day of camp. In his mind’s ear, along with the musical phrases he could have been playing at that moment, sounded a saying he had heard somewhere: Remain silent and you may be thought a fool; open your mouth and remove all doubt.

ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE walk around all day with music in their heads: snatches of recordings, idealized versions of their own playing, half-formed harmonic and melodic ideas. Most such people hold jobs that have little or nothing to do with music, which obliges them to reach an accommodation with their internal jukeboxes in order to function in the workaday world.

The stakes in this bargain—the amateur musician’s version of the professional musician’s struggle to balance aesthetic satisfaction with earning a living—can be high. Music can make life worth living, but it can make you crazy, too. Just ask the two campers, a psychiatrist and a psychotherapist, who treat the anguished psyches of musicians as part of their practices. “I went to see the ‘Messiah’ one year,” the psychiatrist said, “and there were 15 people onstage I’d treated,” a chorus of the musically afflicted.

Several campers said they have had to resist the musical urge at work, deferring it until later in the day, later in life. John Barrett, a trombone-playing lawyer known to all at Tritone as The Judge, used to be a town justice in Webster, near Rochester. “I wore robes, sat in court,” he said. “I tried to keep a sense of humor, but sometimes you have to be serious, because people make serious mistakes and they have to pay for them. I had to push

aside music to do the job.” Charlie Rath, who went to the University of Notre Dame with Gene Bertoncini before embarking on a corporate career, also shoved aside the music in his head when he was at the office. “I tried to suppress it,” he said. “I had to get some work done.” Rath rose to the position of executive vice president for marketing at Wendy’s International before retiring to a comfortable bass-playing existence that has allowed him to let music take over his life, rather than distract him from it.

The Arenstein brothers are still in their early forties, far from the age when they can think of retiring to make music all day long. Michael forbids himself to listen to jazz when he performs surgery. “Good music in the operating room is no good,” he says. “I get too into it, I pay too much attention to it.” Seth, who hears trumpets in his head, says that music always threatens to take over, even when he is far from both the office and his instrument. “It can even interfere with your golf game. When I get ready to swing I have to clear my head. The last thing in there is usually a piece of music.”

If all those who hear music in their head could devote themselves to it as they devote themselves to their job, the world would be a more perfect place for them. But, the world being considerably less than perfect, most members of the music-in-the-head tribe have to work hard to find time for music in lives ordered by other priorities. And, since they cannot develop their musical gift as fully as they might like to, they have to learn to be content with making music at all.

That, in a way, is what Fred Sturm was talking about when he said to his big band, “Kids don’t know how much fun it is to play in time. One of the simple pleasures of playing jazz as you get older is playing in time, just loving time.” He raised his hands to conducting position to cue another try at a rollicking passage that was not yet tight enough. “Okay, at number 36,” he said, “and think time, *love* time.”

ON TUESDAY MORNING, Mike Kaupa, shepherding his combo through a practice run on “Autumn Leaves,” called on Seth Arenstein to take a solo. The FBI man and a bearded fellow known as Smoky had just taken their solos. Seth paused to collect himself, then delivered one. Nothing exceptional, but it would

do. A few choruses later, taking his turn at trading solos with the drummer, Seth came up with a simple, melancholy phrase. When trading again with the drummer on the next tune, he tried a laughing effect at the end of a run. Kaupa said, “Hey, great. Never played jazz before, and you’re doing it.”

“INNER VOICES,” John Harmon told his master class of advanced pianists on Wednesday morning, “that’s where all the fun is. It’s always the things in between that create interest beyond what’s already there. You want to pick up every rock and see what’s underneath it.” Harmon sat at a piano; Michael Arenstein and three others sat at desks, taking notes now and then.

Harmon was talking about the subtle textures and tone colors found in the middle notes of chords, where, he said, the essence of a song often resides. “The trickiest part,” he said, “is getting from one chord to the next in a musical way.” Beginners and mid-level noodlers, trying to play the right scale over each successive chord, tend to produce choppy, dutiful music that sounds like a series of exercises arranged side by side. Listening to a song’s inner voices, and improvising melodic and harmonic lines around them, would help Harmon’s charges resist that tendency.

“Take chances,” Harmon said. “Get out on limbs and find your way back.”

AFTER DINNER on Wednesday, the Arenstein brothers took stock of the week so far. Seth said he was learning a great deal about instrumental technique, about how to practice, about jazz. He was excited and daunted by the prospect of improvising in public on Thursday and Friday evenings, but he did not want to let that excitement make him lose sight of what mattered most: learning to do things properly. “The actual moment of the solo is not the point,” he insisted. “The next six months is.” He planned, when he got home, to “look for people who want to be serious about playing jazz—not just get together, but people who’ll say, ‘We’ll play these 10 tunes in these keys.’” Being equipped to get serious like that, rather than the spirited at-taboys he might receive from fellow campers after fumbling through a solo in concert, would be the best thing about having spent a week at Tritone.

Michael, too, was holding back from plunging into the summer-camp melodrama of the climactic talent shows. "This camp is really good for people who don't get to play with other people much," he said. "I'm using it differently. I have people to jam with at home. I'm using it to learn." Gene Bertoncini and John Harmon, especially, were showing him "how to construct more interesting music, form-wise: how to build an introduction, a middle section, not just blow through." They had inspired Michael to set his sights higher as a musician. "Maybe I'll do a little arranging, maybe even composing."

Both brothers were having a good time at Tritone, perhaps even a life-changing good time, but they wanted to concentrate on doing things well, rather than on sentiment. They wanted camp to be about being a jazz musician rather than about acting like one for a week.

THE BEGINNERS in Fred Sturm's combo—including a kindly but formidable retired teacher on trumpet, a pair of gentle flutists and the ancient Carle Porter on tenor sax—did not feel ready to perform in public, but Sturm assured them they would be fine. On Thursday morning they picked gingerly through John Coltrane's "Mr. P.C.," with Sturm helping out on trombone to keep them together. "Just a couple of things when we get out there onstage," he told them afterward, projecting optimism. "If you're going to take two choruses on your solo, you want to keep interest. Think about the architecture a little. Ramp up. Start with slow rhythmic values, quieter, and then you're getting higher, busier." Most of his charges looked as if taking two choruses was the last thing on their minds. They would be happy to get through one chorus without having a stroke, or to forgo soloing altogether. Only the eternally game Porter, bent over his horn, did not seem scared. He looked as if two choruses might not be enough for him.

Sturm hurried off to grab a sandwich for lunch, then returned to meet with his other ensemble, the big band. He was still recruiting soloists for their Friday evening concert. "Anybody else who hasn't gotten around to volunteering?" he pressed. "Anybody? I won't name names, like Seth. How about it, Seth? Do you want to take a solo?" Seth Arenstein said, "No," smiling but emphatic.

KILBOURN HALL, august and plush, holds some 450 people. Campers, their friends and families, and curious locals half-filled the hall on Thursday evening for the combo show.

The audience's pre-concert hubbub fell away, and the pregnant hush that followed seemed to stretch and stretch—until Carle Porter's voice carried into the hall from offstage, calling out, in mock anguish, "I can't go on!" Smiling devilishly, he led Fred Sturm's combo onto the stage a moment later. He took the first solo, too, mistakes and all, honking and growling.

Sturm's teaching and optimism had paid off. The beginners played their very best, better than they had in practice sessions. Having made it through the first tune, as the crowd applauded them, Porter and the trumpeter spontaneously turned to each other and shook hands; so did the flutists, flushed with joyful relief. Not exactly poker-faced jazz cool, but on this evening who needed it?

The combos came on one after another, progressing from beginners to advanced players. Each played a couple of tunes and offered some nugget of pleasure. Especially at the beginning, most of the concert's charge derived from the drama of people who do something else for a living putting on a show. The crowd applauded them for their pluck as much as anything else, for daring to bare their secret musical lives in public.

Seth Arenstein took his solos, on "Autumn Leaves" and an odd original tune called "Farm Fresh Reggae," with eyes and trumpet raised skyward. He kept calm and did not rush, creating a simple figure to explore in one solo and employing a mute in the other. He had a full, round tone and a measured air that made simplicity seem musically direct rather than rudimentary. Thirty years before, when he was a kid, his teachers had made him memorize his chords and scales. He had never really put that knowledge to use until called upon to improvise at Tritone.

The four singers came on, one by one, to do their numbers. They had all worked hard with Janet Planet to temper their Broadway and operatic training with jazz technique, and the lessons had taken, at least in part. One camper's "I'm Beginning to See the Light" had more jazz in it than it did on Monday, for instance, but when she arrived at the last "light" she gave it the big opera treatment from which Planet had been trying to dissuade her all week.

Bertoncini's combo came out to close the show. Michael Arenstein took a masterful solo on their brisk, coolly rephrased "No Greater Love," telling a story in chord colors and long, twisting lines. The pleasure of the concert had changed. The more advanced groups were good enough that one could stop worrying about catastrophes and enjoy the free music.

After the concert, in the lobby of Kilbourn Hall, Seth took back what he had said about the relative unimportance of his first public performance as a jazz player. "No, it's a big deal," he said, smiling broadly, relieved and proud, storing the evening to take out and reconsider later.

AT THE BIG BAND'S dress rehearsal on Friday, when Fred Sturm asked one last time for volunteers, Seth sheepishly raised his hand, and everybody gave him a cheer. When it came time to take that solo in the evening concert, on a tune called "Follow the Leader," Seth rose from the back row and opened with a surprise quotation from Duke Ellington's "C Jam Blues," which went over big. He kind of got through the rest of it, but, still, he had pulled off a musical witticism onstage, which for a novice improviser took presence of mind and some nerve.

As human drama, the two concerts were satisfying, and sometimes as jazz, too. When the music was good, it was good enough; when it was bad, it was honest and heartfelt. The expression of stunned joy that typically spread over the face of a camper after taking a solo seemed well earned. And when Sturm's big band got going, mostly on the tracks but just a little out of control, the sheer volume of blowing and aspiration carried everyone away with it.

The teachers at Tritone urged the campers to strip down their playing to its essence, rather than anxiously cluttering the soundscape with rote licks and scales. They preached a gospel of improvisational simplicity: The music you wish you could play is inside the music you can already play, not out there somewhere in an undiscovered realm of genius. And, at least during the week they spent at fantasy camp, the campers could believe in the larger application of this message: When you strip away the clutter of living and devote yourself to music, you find that the life you wish you could lead is already there, inside the life you lead now. ■