

teacher resource guide

jazz
assembly

*freebird:
the early life of
sarah vaughan*

Newport Jazz Ambassador Program



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about newport festivals foundation

“There never was and probably never will be another singer with the voice that was Sarah Vaughan’s,” says George Wein, the founder and creator of both Newport Jazz Festival and Newport Folk Festival, and the chairman of the board of Newport Festivals Foundation, created in 2010 to maintain the legacy of these beloved music festivals.

“Whether it was singing ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ *a capella* or scatting a Charlie Parker tune, the magnificence of her sound was incomparable. We had the pleasure of working with ‘Sassy’ many times in Newport and New York, and in multiple cities in Europe and Asia. Each concert was unforgettable,” Wein adds.

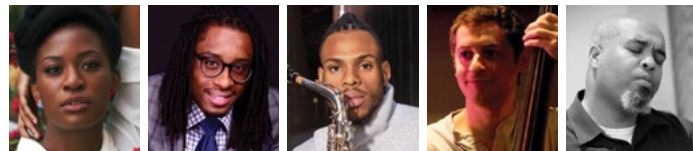
Newport Festivals Foundation, Inc., has sponsored both the development and the performance of *Freebird: The Early Life of Sarah Vaughan* to honor her work and keep her memory alive, particularly in her home city, Newark.

Newport Festivals Foundation was founded in 2010 to maintain the legacy of the Newport Jazz and Newport Folk Festivals. The Foundation aims to expand the impact of its Festivals through educational programs that celebrate innovation while preserving the deep traditions inherent in jazz and folk music. This is accomplished through assembly performances at public schools, instrument donations, funding for afterschool programs and more.

“We are proud to underwrite the Sarah Vaughan Jazz Assembly, produced by our friends at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center,” says Wein. “We thank Hope and Robert F. Smith for their support of this project.”

For more information, visit newportfestivals.org.

cast members



Shenel Johns
Sarah Vaughan

Jarrett Walser
Apollo Host/
Club Owner

Justin Jones
James &
Billy Eckstein

Eric Neveloff
John Kirby/
Copacabana
Announcer

Michael Parker
Mr. Vaughan/
Georgie/
Preacher

about the performance

Free Bird: The Early Life of Sarah Vaughan is an energetic and beautiful production highlighting “the Divine One” or Sassy, as Vaughan was nicknamed. It is a musical play that touches on career-defining moments in Vaughan’s early years, interspersed with jazz classics and songs from Vaughan’s repertoire, such as her lovely and haunting rendition of “Send in the Clowns.”

The story starts with the strong-willed Vaughan quitting an important and lucrative gig at the Copacabana Club just a few days before Christmas in 1945. The audience gets a glimpse of her confident personality and how it propelled her to success.

The production segues back to Newark, New Jersey, Vaughan’s hometown, and reveals how Vaughan, as a teenager, would sneak out late at night to listen to music at the night clubs and dance halls in the city. Another important touchstone in her life was her church, Mount Zion Baptist Church, where Vaughan would play the piano and organ.

The play goes onto dramatize her pivotal appearance at the famous Apollo Theater where she got a first taste of recognition outside her church. Her time working with jazz bebop greats Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie is also highlighted.

about myxolydia tyler

The Production’s Playwright

Tyler is an actress, playwright and voice and speech coach originally from Rocky Mount, Virginia and who now lives in Brooklyn, New York. She has performed on various stages across the country, from New York City to Little Rock, Arkansas, and also on TV. One of her notable roles was in the Baltimore Center Stage’s production of *The Mountaintop*, a dramatic and fictional portrayal of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s last day alive at the Lorraine Hotel. Tyler portrays the female lead role of Carmae, a hotel maid who meets the civil rights leader. She has also performed in the following productions: *Detroit ’67*, *Well Intentioned White People*, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *All the Way*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Global Cooling: The Women Chill*.

in the spotlight

How did the idea of this show come about?

There was a desire to have something written that not only showcased Sarah’s life, but that also featured Newark in an interesting way and connected to places that are still part of Newark’s history. My dad was a jazz musician and I listened to her music growing up. I am also interested in her ability to sustain herself as an artist for so many years.

Why are certain moments from Sarah Vaughan’s life highlighted in the show?

There was spirit within her that I noticed that manifested as this energy that refused to be put in a box; refusing to do what was the logical next step for her. She made choices based purely who she was and the way she saw herself. Those were the moments I wanted to highlight. That’s why it was important to highlight the Copacabana. I thought it was important to highlight that she got this great gig and left it. The reality of how that job served her at that age and how she left it was so intriguing to me. Featuring this was important in order to connect the dots on the kind of person she was with a focus on her spirit.

What do you think motivated Sarah to overcome so many barriers in her life and what kind of lessons does that offer to people today?

I hope they are able to see that she was so solely committed to seeing herself as a musician—a professional musician. A lot of her colleagues that studied with her, mentored her and watched her were men. She never saw herself as unequal to them in her abilities. In an interview, she mentioned: “I see myself as a musician so my goal is to create music with my voice. Just like Charlie Parker on the sax. That’s how I see myself with my voice. That’s how I create sound.” She was a purist in that way. I hope people see that uncompromising, unapologetic way she saw herself as an equal to any musician. She took her craft so seriously. She didn’t put any limits to herself. She pushed herself. That was the energy that allowed her to succeed. She did not have a limited view of herself.

A conversation with playwright Myxolydia Tyler

There seem to be visual and auditory connections between sacred church music and nightclub music in the show. Why was that done?

A lot of her training was church music. That was the first music she was introduced to growing up. With her transition to the jazz world, I wanted to make connections between those two—church and jazz. She knew a lot of classical music as well, taking classes at East Side High and Arts High School. I wanted to musically connect that continuum, those dots between the music that influenced her to become a musician to the music she is known for. I wanted to show that certain songs were very similar, and I wanted to show that Sarah was able to hear those connections.

How important is Newark, New Jersey to the show’s story?

That was one of the things early on—we definitely wanted to show Newark in an interesting way—visually. We wanted to paint a picture of the places she moved in and what her day to day was like visually through slides. This is what the city used to look like, and this is where we are now. There are similarities and differences.

What do you hope audience members get from this production?

Overall, I hope people get a sense of pride about Newark and learn about their city in a different way. I took a jazz appreciation class at University of Virginia in the past. One of the most significant things I walked away from that class with was how Newark was an integral part of the jazz scene. The city allowed musicians to really experiment and play. There were so many clubs in Newark. It was a place that allowed people to jam together. Arts were very much valued back then and still are today. I hope the lesson from Sarah’s life is the sense of her untamed spirit. Sometimes that is frowned upon, but as someone who had a very strong sense of self, she pursued her dream with determination and professionalism.

about sarah vaughan’s life

Sarah Vaughan, long considered one of America’s greatest vocalists, was known for her incredible range, the power and throaty richness of her voice, and the exceptional control she had over her instrument. Her performances and recordings influenced countless singers around the world, even during her lifetime. In the pantheon of great jazz singers, Vaughan is in the uppermost firmament along with Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday, according to many music lovers and critics.

“Her voice had wings: luscious and tensile, disciplined and nuanced, it was as thick as cognac, yet soared off the beaten path like an instrumental solo ... that her voice was a four-octave muscle of infinite flexibility made her disarming shtick all the more ironic,” wrote music critic Gary Giddins.

Vaughan was born in Newark, New Jersey on March 27, 1924. Her father was a carpenter and her mother worked as a laundress. Music permeated their daily lives as both of her parents were skilled amateur musicians. From an early age, Vaughan learned how to sing and play piano and organ. Initially, her prodigious talents were directed towards sacred worship at Newark’s Mount Zion Baptist Church, which is still flourishing at 208 Broadway. She is probably the church’s most famous member, according to the church website.

But Vaughan was itchy to get out of the church pews and into the limelight. She got her first taste of stardom when she took part in an amateur night contest at the famous Apollo Theater. She won the competition with her version of the song “Body and Soul” in 1942, instantly marking her for greater things. Earl Hines, a big band leader, hired her to be a pianist and singer after her performance. In 1944, she joined the band of vocalist and bandleader Billy Eckstine.

From there, she began a steady climb in her career as a soloist, notching performances with some of the greatest jazz artists in the 20th century. These performers included Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Benny Carter, Frank Foster and Quincy Jones. It was her connection with Parker and Gillespie that gave Vaughan her entrée into bebop. She adopted the inventive sounds of bebop and incorporated it into her singing, especially in the scatting for which she best known.

Vaughan toured widely across the world, showcasing her irrepressible vocal stylings. She performed in both intimate cabaret settings and large scale concerts with prestigious orchestral ensembles such as the Boston Pops, Cleveland Orchestra and Los Angeles Philharmonic, just to name a few. Additionally, Vaughan performed at Newport Jazz Festival several times and worked with festival producer, George Wein on concerts all over the world.

Vaughan also expanded her audience greatly when she started singing pop songs. As she grew older, Vaughan’s voice became deeper and darker, which prompted music lovers to say her voice was reaching its peak like fine wine.

Vaughan gave her last concert in 1989 at the Blue Note, a legendary New York City jazz club. The following year, Vaughan died at 66 years old on April 3rd of lung cancer. She died at her home in Hidden Hills, just outside of Los Angeles, California and a world away from her humble beginnings in Newark.

Her 1990 obituary from the *Los Angeles Times* stated that she passed away with her mother Ada and adopted daughter Paris Deborah at her bedside.

In her obituary, music critic Martin Bernheimer said: “Sarah Vaughan had a voice of extraordinary sweetness, flexibility and purity, and she used it with uncanny insinuation throughout a wide range. She could have taught many an opera diva lessons in breath control, in legato phrasing and in expressive communication. She was a great singer. Period.”

For her funeral, Vaughan’s family held the service at the same place where people got to hear her talents first: Mount Zion Baptist Church in Newark.

“A Newark girl comes home, having gone full circle,” said the Rev. Granville E. Seward, pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church at the time, “and what a circle that has been.”

“I just sing,” Vaughan once said of herself. “I sing whatever I can.”

- Select Discography
- *Send in the Clowns*, with Count Basie Orchestra
 - *Irving Berlin Songbook*, with Billy Eckstine
 - *At the Blue Note*
 - *In a Romantic Mood*
 - *I Cover the Waterfront*
 - *Lover Man*, with George Treadwell Orchestra, Richard Maltby String Orchestra, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker
 - *The Divine Sarah Vaughan: the Columbia Years*
 - *Sarah Vaughan in Hi-Fi*, with Miles Davis
 - *Sarah Vaughan*, with Clifford Brown
 - *Sassy Swings the Tivoli*

cultural connections

Music in Newark, New Jersey
Sarah Vaughan proudly called Newark home as did so many other important musical artists. Newark has always been an important proving ground for new performers, particularly African Americans, and a hotbed for live musical performance.

As seen in the script of *Free Bird: The Early Life of Sarah Vaughan*, there were many jazz clubs in Newark that Vaughan could sneak off to from her home. Newark is considered one of the greatest jazz cities in the world, according to music scholars, because of the breadth of talent that congregated in the city. As noted in the State of New Jersey website, many jazz players of the early 20th century would hone their chops at clubs like The Alcazar, The Piccadilly Club and the Kinney Club before playing at even bigger venues in New York City. Famous Newark jazz pianists include Willie “The Lion” Smith, Thomas “Fats” Waller, and Donald “The Lamb” Lambert. You can read more about Newark’s jazz history at: nj.gov/nj/about/arts/music.html.

Jazz still maintains a strong foothold in Newark. At the Priory Restaurant on West Market Street, patrons can dig into comfort food while listening to live jazz on most Friday nights. The venue, a former church which boasts a stained-glass dome, is a longtime haunt for jazz fans. On Washington Street, you can go to Clement’s Place, a swank and intimate space where one can hear the best jazz musicians working today plus emerging acts. The Rutgers Newark Institute of Jazz Studies sponsors the club, which was named after Dr. Clement A. Price, a beloved and well-respected professor of American history at Rutgers and a font of knowledge on all things Newark. He was also a huge jazz fan. The Institute itself is an important touchstone for jazz lovers and music scholars. It is considered “the largest and most comprehensive library and archive of jazz and jazz-related materials in the world,” according to its website. The library offers an important oral history on jazz, precious copies of long defunct jazz magazines and journals, important music recordings, scores, manuscripts, artifacts, and the papers of important jazz figures like the saxophonist Benny Carter.

Other important jazz touchstones in Newark include Jazz Vespers at Bethany Baptist Church, where you can listen to live jazz music every first Saturday starting at 6 p.m. Born in 2000 as a new ministry where people “Worship the Lord to the Sounds of Jazz,” artists that have guest performed at Bethany include Junior Mance, Yvette Glover, Hilton Ruiz, Cyrus Chestnut, Jimmy Heath, Earl May, Lizz Wright, David ‘Fathead’ Newman, Mulgrew Miller, Slide Hampton, Sonny Fortune, Houston Person and Geri Allen. The Newark Museum of Art also hosts the very popular event Jazz in the Garden, where patrons can sit on lawn chairs in the verdant grounds of the museum during the summer and listen to top

Notable Jazz Artists connected to New Jersey*	
• Sarah Vaughan b. 1924 d. 1990 <i>Newark</i> - vocalist	• Alan Shorter b. 1932 d. 1987 <i>Newark</i> - trumpeter and flugelhorn player
• Count Basie b.1904 d. 1984 <i>Red Bank</i> - pianist, bandleader, songwriter	• Joe Mooney b. 1911 d. 1975 <i>Paterson</i> - accordionist, organist, and vocalist
• Dizzy Gillespie b. 1917 d. 1993 <i>Englewood</i> - trumpeter, composer, and bandleader	• Kenny Garrett b. 1960 <i>Glen Ridge</i> - saxophonist and flautist
• James P. Johnson b. 1894 d. 1955 <i>New Brunswick</i> - pianist and composer	• John Lee b. 1952 <i>South Orange</i> – bassist and bandleader
• Willie “The Lion” Smith b. 1893 d. 1973 <i>Newark</i> - pianist	• Geri Allen b. 1957 d. 2017 <i>Montclair</i> – pianist
• Thomas “Fats” Waller b. 1904 d. 1943 <i>Newark</i> - pianist	• James Moody b. 1925 d. 2010 <i>Newark</i> – saxophonist
• Donald “The Lamb” Lambert b. 1904 d. 1962 <i>Newark</i> - pianist	• Frank Sinatra b. 1915 d. 1998 <i>Hoboken</i> - vocalist
• Wayne Shorter b. 1933 <i>Newark</i> - saxophonist and composer	*not a complete list

flight jazz acts. Recent artists who have played in the garden include Etienne Charles, Vanessa Rubin, Chembo Corniel and Gary Bartz. Another important Newark jazz fixture is the public radio station WBGO, The Jazz Source, at 88.3FM. The radio station was founded in 1979 and reaches a weekly audience of almost half a million people in the New Jersey/ New York City metro area and millions more via its partnership with NPR. The station, considered an important tastemaker by jazz aficionados, has hosted jazz concerts and educational and news programming – with the overall mission of keeping jazz alive as an important and entertaining artform.

For more jazz, music lovers can visit Shanghai Jazz in Madison, outside Newark in Morris County, where the cozy interior evokes the 1920s. You can dine on Asian-inspired fare while listening to some of the top jazz acts of the New York City metro area and beyond. On many Saturday afternoons, jazz also comes alive at the Candlelight Lounge in Trenton, where you can enjoy homemade comfort food while listening to a rotating group of guest artists – local acts, up and coming prodigies, big names who play more famous stages in New York City and Philadelphia, and critically acclaimed international artists.

Contemporary music makers who also have strong Newark ties include some of the greatest luminaries in gospel, R&B and hip hop: Whitney Houston, Cissy Houston, (continued on next page)

(continued from previous page)

Dionne Warwick, Queen Latifah, Naughty by Nature, Lords of the Underground, Redman and Lauryn Hill. Basketball great and Newark native Shaquille O’Neal even repped Brick City in verse back in the day. O’Neal, who came out with the 1994 album *Shaq-Fu: Da Return*, rapped in one of the songs, “Newark to C.I.”:

*I’m nut-rageous, outrageous, like the Buddha monk
it’s about where you’re from not where you went
Newark, New Jersey, represent, represent*

vocabulary

Apollo Theater

World renowned and historic music hall located in Manhattan’s Harlem neighborhood. The theater has long been a showcase for African-American performers. The theater is famous for its Amateur Night contests—a precursor to *American Idol*—where people would perform in front of a live, highly opinionated audience. People would rub the Tree of Hope at the side of the stage before performing. If the audience deemed a performer to be inadequate, a man with a broom would sweep them off the stage. A who’s who of musical artists have graced the stage of the Apollo. They include Billie Holiday, Sammy Davis Jr., James Brown, Gladys Knight, Luther Vandross, D’Angelo, and of course, Sarah Vaughan.

Bebop

An important, revolutionary style of jazz that came to prominence in the 1940s. This distinctive style features complex improvisations, virtuosity, and torrents of notes that sound experimental compared to big band swing music, which bebop musicians were reacting to at the time. Bebop also encouraged bluesy-style riffs, startling and inventive solos and impressive harmonic range that was richer and deeper than what the jazz world had heard before. Two famous beboppers are alto saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie, who thought of themselves as artists carving out a new path and did not care if this new music was not danceable or escapist compared to old school jazz.

Hip Hop

Popular music genre born in Bronx, New York in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Characterized by heart-thumping beats and rhythms, innovative sampling of different records, and rhyming lyrics sung along to the music aka rapping.

Music critics and historians have anointed DJ Kool Herc the father of hip-hop. Herc played records at parties where he would use turntables to isolate the percussive section of a record – called the break – and prolong it by spinning two records at different times. Once the break ended in one record, Herc would have the second record ready to play the break again. The break would span five minutes instead of 15 seconds, which sent people into fits of dance. Much of jazz would influence hip-hop as especially seen in the work of groups such as A Tribe Called Quest and The Roots.

Jazz

A musical genre that had its start in the early 20th century in New Orleans’ redlight districts. Jazz is characterized by creative and varied syncopation, propulsive and complex rhythms, improvisation, and harmonies that can be simple and sweet to bracingly atonal. It is a fusion of European and African American elements, to put it simply. Jazz bands range in size from large big band ensembles with more than a dozen people to small quartets. Instruments for playing jazz are for the most part traditional string, wind and brass instruments. Music critics have dubbed jazz America’s own homegrown classical music.

Opera

A musical genre with performers singing and playacting a drama or story on stage. Features classical, traditional instruments for music and ornate scenery, costumes and at times dance numbers. Female opera singers are known for their extraordinary range, volume and power, which can fill an entire music hall. Usually performed in French, German or Italian.

Musical

Stage performance featuring singing and dancing set to a story line, such as Broadway hit shows *Mamma Mia*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Phantom of the Opera*. This genre evolved from opera.

Playwright

A person who writes plays or dramas; alternative word is dramatist.

Scatting

A type of jazz singing where no words are used at all but instead the performer sings nonsense syllables and improvises melodies and rhythm. The voice in scatting is seen as much an instrument as the wind, string and brass instruments in a band. Sarah Vaughan was known for her inventive, fun and enjoyable scatting. Beatboxing as an art form evolved from scatting.

resources

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Professional Development: NJPAC Professional Development engages classroom teachers, arts specialists and teaching artists as integrated teams that combine arts pedagogy, content, classroom management and social behavioral strategies to ignite and inspire arts-rich classrooms. Working as a team empowers teachers to share practice and strategy. Our goal is to inspire artistic and intellectual capacities in students, building competence and confidence in both students and teachers.

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Major support for this assembly is provided, in part, by Newport Festivals Foundation and:



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Major support provided by:

Stewart and Judy Colton; Leon and Toby Cooperman; Steven and Beverly Rubenstein Charitable Foundation; The John Strangfeld and Mary Kay Strangfeld Foundation

NJPAC Arts Education programs are made possible through the generosity of our endowment donors: The Arts Education Endowment Fund in honor of Raymond C. Chambers, The Joan and Allen Bildner Family Fund, Leon and Toby Cooperman; Albert and Katherine Merck, The Sagner Companies/The Sagner Family Foundation; Wells Fargo

Generous annual support for NJPAC Arts Education Programs is provided by: Atlantic, Tomorrow's Office; Broadridge Financial Solutions, Inc.; Capital One; Jennifer A. Chalsty; Disney; Mimi and Edwin Feliciano; Investors Foundation; Don Katz & Leslie Larson; Amy C. Liss; McCrane Foundation, Inc., care of Margrit McCrane; The MCJ Amelior Foundation; The Johnny Mercer Foundation; NJ Advance Media/Star-Ledger; Richmond County Savings Foundation; David & Marian Rocker; Santander Bank; TD Charitable Foundation; Turrell Fund; John and Suzanne William/Goldman Sachs Gives