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 radio 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 on to 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.

What did 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.

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 valued back then and still are today. I hope the lesson from Sarah’s life is the sense of her untramelled 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.
Sarah Vaughan, long considered one of America’s greatest vocalists, was known for her incredible range, the power and throatiness 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 was both luxurious and tense, disciplined and nuanced, it was as thick as cognac, yet soared off the beaten path like an instrumental solo ... that voice was a four-act muscle of infinite flexibility made her synonymous with all the more ironic,” wrote music critic Gary Gaddis.

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 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 into bebop. She adopted the inventive sounds of bebop with Parker and Gillespie that gave Vaughan her entrée into jazz artists in the 20th century. These performers included Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday, according to music scholar, 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 every venue 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 Vaughan’s Jazz history at: https://nj.gov/ajb/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 Clemente’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 New Jersey. He was also a huge jazz fan. The Institute itself is an important touchscreen 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 jazz music every 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 Marvin, Vesta Shaw, 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 flight jazz acts. Recent artists who have played in the garden include Etienne Charles, Vanessa Rubin, Chemo Cornel and Gary Bartz. Another important Newark jazz fixture is the Institute of Jazz at The Newark Performing Arts Center, where the Newark 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 area and more via its partnership with NPR. The station, considered an important tastemaker by jazz aficionados, has hosted jazz concerts and educational and fundraising events with the small 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 even resembles the Crystal Palace, as can dine in an 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 Congregational Lounge in Trenton, where you can enjoy homemade comfort food while listening to a rotating group of guest artists – locals, up and coming prodigies, big names who play many of New York 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)
Apollo Theater

World renowned and historic music hall located in Manhattan's Harlem neighborhood. The theater has an impressive 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 complex harmonic range that was richer and deeper than what the jazz world had heard before. Two famous beboppers are alto saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter 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.

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 brazenly 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 quintets. 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 creative and varied syncopation, propulsive and complex rhythms, improvisation, and harmonies that can be simple and sweet to brazenly 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 quintets. 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.
In-School Residencies: Drama + Social Studies. Dance + Math. It all adds up in NJPAC’s In-School Residencies in which professional teaching artists partner with educators to bring the arts into the classroom. Each 7- to 10-week program culminates in a student performance or an interactive family workshop. All programs address state and national standards. NJPAC is the regional provider in New Jersey for international arts programs like the NJ Wolf Trap Program and Dancing Classrooms Global.

Assemblies: NJPAC presents engaging school assembly programs that are presented by professional artists that invite students into the enchanting world of live performance. NJPAC’s assembly series promotes cultural awareness and invigorates learning by presenting works that are connected to your school’s curriculum.

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.

Saturday Programs: NJPAC’s Saturday programs are geared towards students at every level—from those who dream of starring on Broadway to those who are still learning their scales. Students work with professional artists to build technique and develop their own creative style in film, contemporary modern dance, hip hop, jazz, musical theater and symphonic band.

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For more information or to schedule an appointment, please call our education sales team at 973.353.7058 or email artseducation@njpac.org. Visit njpac.org/education

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