

Arts @ Holy Trinity celebrates Mardi Gras with Guy Van Duser & Billy Novick

by Jarrett Hoffman



A guitarist walks up to a clarinetist and asks, “You play any jazz?” What sounds like the start of a bad joke was actually the start of a musical relationship that hits 45 years this month.

That makes two reasons to celebrate. Both that

milestone and the festival of Mardi Gras will be in the air when guitarist Guy Van Duser and clarinetist Billy Novick visit Akron’s Arts @ Holy Trinity series on Fat Tuesday, February 16 at 7:00 pm.

For the occasion, they’ve put together a pre-recorded concert largely built around classic New Orleans jazz, a staple of their repertoire. The playlist includes works by Jelly Roll Morton, George Gershwin, Andy Razaf, Hoagy Carmichael, Scott Joplin, Jimmie Noone, and Duke Ellington, as well as an original by Novick.

Perhaps the place to start with this duo is their uncommon combination of instruments. As they said during a conference call, they’ve liked the sound of it from the beginning. “I’m surprised more people don’t do it, because it’s two wooden instruments, and they’re both very acoustic,” Van Duser said. “Billy plays saxophone too, but we don’t even use it onstage because I can’t begin to make that much sound.”

Also an immediate match was their music-making. “We didn’t have to get out the sheet music, the fake books, or anything like that,” the guitarist said. “We just called out tunes, and we both had good enough ears and enough experience with our respective instruments to just start playing together. It gelled.”

At the same time, their backgrounds brought plenty of contrast to the table. Novick was very much geared toward improvisation. “I’d refuse to play the same thing twice in a row, even if it meant I wouldn’t play something good,” he joked. Van Duser was more deliberate, in large part because of his complex, fingerstyle guitar playing.

But over the 45 years — a number that’s “almost unfathomable,” Novick said — they’ve melded musically. “I’m more structured in the way I play, much more comfortable playing things over and over again, while Guy has become a really good improviser.”

As people, they’re great friends who have always gotten along, “but we have different lifestyles,” Novick said. He used to get up early to bring his kids to school, while Van Duser would greet the day “at the crack of ten” after practicing late at night, until two or three o’clock. There’s also the contrast of cuisine — the mostly vegetarian clarinetist and the meat-eating guitarist.

One complaint from Novick is that he can’t talk sports with Van Duser. “So we have to talk about stuff like music,” he said, laughing. Credit the guitarist for meeting his duo partner halfway. “When we were on tour, I used to ride in the passenger seat and read the sports page to him just to make the miles go by,” he said.

To Van Duser, all those differences, both musical and non-musical, have kept things interesting. But when it comes to staying together this long, there’s been one important similarity: “We haven’t been obsessed with ambition,” the guitarist said.

“We had a couple of agents and a manager for a while, just to see if we could become more widely known, which did eventually start to happen. But there’s never been this huge push, like *we’ve got to make it, we’ve got to be stars*. Basically we wanted to make recordings together, and we’ve been able to make at least a dozen — both LP’s and CDs.”

Getting to 45 years has also been a testament to their repertoire. “We chose a kind of music that’s essentially timeless,” Van Duser said. “We’re not out of style, and yet we’ve always been out of style — we started playing 1920s swing in the ‘70s. And that music has recycled. Every ten or fifteen years, there’s another surge of the swing era.”

Within that genre, they aim for a combination of tradition and creativity. “Bill’s the authority for the swing era,” Van Duser said. “He knows all the players and the styles, so he brings the references that are necessary for us to be classic swing players.”

The experimentation comes in restyling the music to fit Van Duser’s playing. “If we had put together a regular swing quartet or quintet, I would have ended up just playing

rhythm guitar,” he said. “But because of the piano style of guitar that I play, we found out pretty quickly that we didn’t need those guys, because I could play the bass and the rhythm guitar, and at the same time take the solo on top.”

The discussion of that very involved style of playing brought us back to Van Duser’s evolution as an improviser. “At first, it was like classical guitar music for me,” he said. “I was arranging all the solos and practicing them just so they could be done at all. But eventually, with Billy’s free nature in his playing — a different solo every night — I got so envious that I started working on that kind of chops. Now, he and I can trade off solos.”

There was so much to talk about together, from the many highlights of the program, to Novick’s “three Johns” (Dodds, Hodges, and Coltrane) and the broken wrist he suffered playing football, to the origins of Van Duser’s “stride guitar” playing and the friendship he developed with the famed Chet Atkins. The duo was so generous with their time that I even got to hear some live music right on Zoom — a few demonstrations of the finger gymnastics that go into that guitar style.

In the end, it’s impossible to cover it all here. With the number of great stories and amount of great music this duo has to share, let’s hope they iron out some plans for a real, physical trip to Northeast Ohio — sometime safe, and sometime soon.

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