



## Arts &amp; Life

# Jazz fest day 7: Cracking open the clubs for spy music and loons

WXXI News | By **Jeff Spevak**  
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Provided / CGI Rochester International Jazz Festival

Big Lazy.

The big CGI Rochester International Jazz Festival shows at downtown's Parcel 5 have been tough to miss, with the bass booming off the surrounding buildings. The Booker T Soul Review packed the place Thursday; the music is comfort food for the soul.

But you have to crack open the clubs, like a squirrel hustling an acorn, to find a treat like New York City's Big Lazy.

"Don't worry," guitarist Steve Ulrich assured the packed room at Montage Music Hall. "Everything's gonna be OK."

Ulrich and his trio, Big Lazy, were already deep into its first set Thursday by the time they got to that piece, "Dear Trouble," a moody soundtrack of guitar, drums and bass.

As instrumental trios go, this was a dark one. But that was OK. A soundtrack of intrigue, with Ulrich turning up to 10 the reverb and echo effects on his guitar. Crime surf.

Ominous. But that was OK. Not surprisingly, these guys are big fans of Tom Waits' junkyard mentality. "Highway twang," Ulrich called it. Driving music, with the top down. For special effects, Big Lazy drifted no further than bowed bass on one song, or Ulrich playing some lap-slide guitar (more properly pronounced "gee-tar").

Film noir. Ulrich does compose soundtracks; he's done a couple for HBO. They brought out John Lennon's "Girl," although it wasn't particularly recognizable as "we put it through our odd little filter," Ulrich said. Indeed, "Girl" came out as kind of a tarantella lullaby, with a break for chaos in the middle. Similarly, Ulrich identified "Night Train" as "roadhouse blues." Perhaps it was the old Jimmy Forrest song, but ... maybe not.

Yes, intrigue. But that was OK. "Spy music," Ulrich suggested, setting up the story of how the longtime band had initially called itself Lazyboy, until the makers of recliner chairs hit them with a cease-and-desist order.

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Jeff Spevak

That's the kind of artistic hurdles faced by our musicians today.

Big Lazy plays two sets Friday night at The Little Theater.

## Today's jazz haiku

Life as a movie

riffs as character studies

notes in black and white

## Dissecting Hans Bilger

If you remember dissecting a frog in high school biology class, that's what we were looking for from the Hans Bilger Group at The Little Theatre. According to his bio, he'd studied evolutionary biology at Yale, and incorporated the sounds of nature — birds, bats and frogs — into his music.



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Hans Bilger.

Alongside Ivy Leaguer Bilger, this was a high-minded trio. The electric guitarist composes classical music. The drummer is a poet.

Bilger is from Brooklyn, and splits his time now between New York City and Austin, Texas. He told of coming to the Rochester jazz fest several times over the years, seeing musicians such as the drummer Brian Blade and pianist Cedar Walton.

Generally playing acoustic guitar, Bilger would pick up a double bass when inspiration called for it. "Same Dream," he said, was inspired by the pandemic, "when repetition seemed more frequent." Bilger told of being inspired by a drive along Oregon's Columbia River gorge. He was inspired by a girl, Maria.

There was mention of a loon. The inspiration of birds, bats and frogs seemed overplayed. Or perhaps they merely set the mood, like car trouble does for Tom Waits. Instead, dissect Bilger and what we find is a sensitive indie hero.

## Preview: Julia Nunes brings home the bacon, and The Bacon Brothers

It took Julia Nunes six years to go from strumming her ukulele while sitting on her bed at Skidmore College to sitting in a chair next to Conan O'Brien on the set of his late-night talk show.

That long indie-fan-fueled journey for the Fairport native, which began in 2007, comes back home Friday, when she opens for The Bacon Brothers for a free show at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Park.

Nunes' career has spanned seven albums of often-quirky songs, driven by a savvy use of social media. She first caught fire while playing her uke in her dorm room, covering songs by familiar acts such as The Beatles and Destiny's Child and posting them on YouTube. Some of her versions on the platform have soared beyond a million views. Her YouTube channel has over a quarter-million subscribers.

Nunes has opened previously for The Bacon Brothers, the acoustic project headed by the actor Kevin Bacon and his brother, Michael. She's also opened for Ben Folds and Ben Kweller, played the Bonnaroo Music & Arts Festival twice, chatted with David Dye on NPR's "World Café" and toured England twice, which included being interviewed on BBC1.

Nunes runs on a do-it-yourself ethos. Her loyal fan base donated \$77,888 through Kickstarter to fund her fourth album, "Settle Down," which went on to No. 9 on Billboard's Independent Albums chart. Subsequent YouTube campaigns pulling in \$134,403 and \$71,025 backed her next two



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albums.

Videos have also been a part of Nunes' story. "Stay Awake," the song she performed on O'Brien's show, features her walking through an office, impishly playing tricks on sleeping employees, then performing for a sleeping audience.



Summer Engman / Provided By CGI Rochester International Jazz Festival

Julia Nunes.

As her songs have grown less cute, and more challenging, so have her videos. Now living in Los Angeles, Nunes identifies as queer, and the video for "No Sudden Moves" features her luxuriating with another woman in a bathtub filled with glass beads. The video accompanying "Dear Ben" is awash in pink imagery — balloons, flowers, candy hearts — as she issues a gentle warning, very heavy on a prime obscenity, that Ben had better not try any romancing with her again.

Nunes goes on at 7 p.m.; The Bacon Brothers at 9 p.m.

## Schedule changes

Davina & the Vagabonds joined the list of jazz fest bands that had to drop out due to travel issues, illness or COVID. Performing in their place Friday at Innovation Theater is the John Bailey Quintet and on Saturday at Montage, Grace Serene & The Superclean.

And for Saturday's Drum Battle at Innovation Theater, Justin Faulkner replaces Kenny Washington.

## Jeff's Friday picks



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Joe Locke.

- Joe Locke Group, Temple Theater, 7 and 9:15 p.m. One of the top jazz vibraphonists in the world, Locke grew up in Rochester and learned his jazz in the clubs here. But he's also tuned into the moment. Locke's website currently features a video that combines Bob Dylan's "All Along the Watchtower," his own "Breathe" and the words of Frederick Douglass in a powerful condemnation of racism today.
- The New Power Generation Plays the Music of Prince, Parcel 5, 9 p.m. Alumni of the late Prince's backing band have been keeping the music alive. Expect a big crowd, and a big party, comparable to what we saw Wednesday night when Sheila E played the venue.
- Bobby Rush, Hyatt Regency Ballroom, 7:45 and 9:45 p.m. Now in his 80s, the blues guitarist's latest album won a Grammy for Best Traditional Blues Album.

Arts & Life



### Jeff Spevak



Jeff Spevak has been a Rochester arts reporter for nearly three decades, with seven first-place finishes in the Associated Press New York State Features Writing Awards while working for the Democrat and Chronicle.

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