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INSIDE CHARLOTTE ARTS



JOHN D. SIMMONS For the Observer

JazzArts Charlotte and its co-founder, president and CEO Lonnie Davis celebrate the group's 15th anniversary of elevating the jazz scene around Charlotte. The nonprofit focuses on community enrichment through music education, live performances and musician support.

JazzArts Charlotte marks 15th anniversary with big plans

BY LIZ ROTH AUS BERTRAND
Arts Correspondent

As JazzArts Charlotte celebrates its 15th anniversary this fall, the organization is focused as much on its future as on its past.

The nonprofit has grown significantly since its earliest days, when it started with a series of free performances at Festival in the Park and an educational program with a handful of students. It's also been a major force behind building a jazz community in Charlotte.

Today, it serves thousands of children and adults with performances and educational initiatives.

For years, the group was considered one of the area's best-kept secrets, said JazzArts Charlotte's president, CEO and co-founder Lonnie Davis. It has evolved from an organization with a small budget and big ideas to an anchor arts organization in the region.

According to its 2023-24



ANDY MAJORS

iliana Rose instructing JazzArts' Nuestro Tiempo Latin Jazz Youth Ensemble. The program introduces students in 7th to 12th grade to the fundamentals and history of Latin jazz.

Impact Report, the organization's annual revenue and expenses now top \$1 million.

One of the accomplishments Davis is most proud of is the way JazzArts has worked to connect people of all ages and backgrounds in Charlotte. Jazz, she said, has served as a "tool to

bring people together who otherwise would never cross paths."

DIVERSITY AND GROWTH AMONG JAZZ AUDIENCES

In 2018 and 2022, JazzArts Charlotte commissioned audience analyses from ArtsMarket,

a consulting firm. According to its findings, JazzArts Charlotte's audience is "the most diverse among local arts organizations."

"That's something we're proud of, but we're very intentional about being diverse," Davis said. "And that is measuring diversity in every way. That's not only ethnic diversity but it's age, it's socioeconomic, it's education and... life stages."

Davis credits JazzArts' varied programming and affordable pricing as essential factors that allow it to serve so many different types of audiences. That's possible, she said, thanks to a variety of funding from individuals, community partners, foundations and corporate donors.

"Through our program, we've been able to bring people together in a very organic, unique way... and build valuable social capital... amongst the community," she said.

Those efforts have not only brought in a more diverse audience but also brought in many more people to its programs.

Between 2019 and 2022, Davis

said JazzArts doubled its audience base.

The organization's signature jazz series, The Jazz Room, which began with one monthly show now offers four performances a month. It features local, regional and nationally-known artists throughout the year.

Shows include popular tributes to artists of the past, like the upcoming Sasha Masakowski concerts featuring the Bossa Nova sounds of Brazilian legend Antonio Carlos Jobim. They also highlight innovators who stretch the genre in new directions, like five-time Grammy nominated trumpeter and multi-instrumentalist Chief Adjuah (formerly known as Christian Scott).

JazzArts growth also comes from a commitment to building a jazz audience in Charlotte through music education, workshops and ensemble opportunities for young musicians.

According to JazzArts Charlotte's website, the organization has reached more than 50,000 local K-12 students since 2011 through its JazzArts Academy, with 38% of those students coming from low-income communities.

The organization's educational programs have expanded and been greatly enriched, Davis said, by hiring JazzArts Charlotte's first Education Director, Patrick Brown, two years ago.

"We're really thrilled to have him and, you know, all of our other amazing team members that do this work day in and day out to... move our mission forward."

Programs include youth ensembles, jazz in school workshops and summer camp opportunities.

One of the newest groups is the Nuestro Tiempo Latin Jazz Youth Ensemble, now in its second year. The program introduces students in 7th to 12th grade to the fundamentals and history of the Latin jazz genre as they rehearse and play together.

"There are not many programs like this around the country," Davis said. "But the goal... is to expose our young musicians to the contributions and the culture and the rich heritage of Latin Jazz, Afro-Cuban music and American music."

The program, which is directed by Cuban jazz pianist and vocalist iliana Rose along with Afro-Caribbean and Latin percussionist Johnny Vergara, meets weekly. About 20 students, selected via audition, currently participate. Many come from families with South American or Latin American

SEE ANNIVERSARY, 5C

Rainbow Kitten Surprise went from playing dorms to arenas

BY THÉODEN JANES
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It's been 10 years since Rachael McKinney looked the members of Rainbow Kitten Surprise in the eyes and — as the Boone-based indie folk-rock band's brand-new booking agent at the time — gave them the bad news:

"We have to change this name," McKinney, then an Appalachian State University senior, told the group consisting of five musical artists who'd joined forces after meeting as freshmen living on campus in Bowie Hall. "It's not happening. We cannot do this. No one's gonna take us seriously. "We have to change it."

Then they gave her some bad news right back: "It's too late," one of them replied, matter-of-factly. "People already know us too well for us to change the name."

A decade later, it is happening. They *can* do this. Save for the people who just haven't been paying attention, the vast majority of the music industry — and the thoughtful music fans who appreciate their emotional-

ly raw lyrics — are taking RKS plenty seriously.

And on Oct. 25 and 26, the Mountaineers-turned-Nash-villians-turned-darlings of major festivals like Bonnaroo and Lollapalooza will perform energetic back-to-back concerts at Spectrum Center in Charlotte and Lenovo Center in Raleigh, the largest indoor venues they've ever headlined in their former home state.

McKinney, who has been with the band ever since and is now its tour manager, can't help but laugh at memories of that debate, given how everything panned out for lead singer Ela Melo, guitarists Darrick "Bozzy" Keller and Ethan Goodpaster, and drummer Jess Haney.

"I appreciated that confidence in it, but I also just thought it was silly," she says of their original discussion about the name. "And looking back, I was wrong."

"But then you have bands like, what, Diarrhea Planet, and it's like, *At least we didn't have that name*. I love them, don't get me wrong. But at least we didn't pick *that* name."

Over the summer, we spoke to McKinney, Melo, Keller, Goodpaster; people who booked them

in Boone; and multiple members of their inner circle back at App State, including — in his first mainstream-media interview ever — the man who came up with the name while high on morphine.

Those conversations (lightly edited for clarity and brevity) make up our exclusive oral history of Rainbow Kitten Surprise.

Note: All interviews for this story were completed prior to Hurricane Helene's arrival in Western North Carolina in late September. After the storm, Rainbow Kitten Surprise posted the following message on its Facebook page: "We're heartbroken to see the devastation left behind by Hurricane Helene. Our beloved home of North Carolina needs our help right now." The band listed a variety of ways its fans could help victims. And this month, RKS pledged to donate \$50,000 raised through its fall concert-ticket sales to recovery efforts related to Helene.

'HANGING OUT, SMOKING CIGARETTES, PLAYING SONGS'

As App State freshmen, Melo, Keller, Goodpaster, Haney, and Charlie Holt (the band's original



JIMMY FONTAINE

Rainbow Kitten Surprise started in a dorm and is now headlining the biggest arenas in North Carolina.

bassist, who parted ways with RKS last winter) all were assigned to the old Bowie Hall dorm. The only ones who knew each other prior to college were Goodpaster and Haney, fellow Robbinsville, N.C. natives who throughout high school were in multiple bands together that mostly just played in Haney's basement.

Ela Melo: I had a lot of things on the list of what I wanted to do with my life, but I wasn't quite sure about any of it. One thing that I did know is I did want to make music that people could get down to, people enjoyed. I had been doing that for years already, in my hometown of Albemarle, just chilling, had a

band with some friends there. That didn't pan out. So I came onto the campus with a mantra, almost.

Darrick "Bozzy" Keller: I was definitely a shy kid growing up. But I remember going in for the first week of college and being like, *Man, this feels like summer camp. This is never gonna end*. I really stepped out of my comfort zone and would try to take my guitar and go jam with people and make friends. ...

Ethan Goodpaster: When I wasn't going to class, I was playing guitar, finding someone to play *something* with. There

SEE SURPRISE, 2C