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## Stamford's 9th Note Jazz Supper Club brings big-band sound into the 21st century

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Jazz singer Stephanie Harrison, of Stamford, joins the 9th Note Jazz Orchestra Monday evening and belts out a rendition of "Natural Woman."

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Jens Wendelboe, jazz trombonist and composer, doesn't want to talk about his long association with singer Donna Summer, or touring with Blood, Sweat and Tears, or playing on Broadway in the Gloria Estefan musical, "On Your Feet."

His attitude toward such celebrity gigs is "been there, done that." No, what excites Wendelboe is the musical experiment he is conducting every Monday night at the 9th Note Jazz Supper Club in Stamford.

At the invitation of club owner Chris O'Dowd, Wendelboe is bringing a 17-piece jazz orchestra to town, and with it, a new idea of what a big band can do.

"We're not just putting up a band and playing a concert. Everybody does that," Wendelboe says early one evening before a show at the 9th Note, on the edge of the downtown business district. "When you come here today, you will have this show. When you come next Monday, it will be a different show. You never know what's going to happen. We may call someone up from the audience. We may do a duet in the middle. I may even rehearse a tune in public, just to teach people how we work, like a master class."

The two-set, two-hour performance that evening will be a demonstration. It begins with a pulsating Philip Glass-ian keyboard sound that builds into a multithroated 10-minute blast. When at last Wendelboe pauses to speak, he notes that he'd arranged something special to mark the imminent arrival of the summer solstice.

"The reason I don't say anything more about the tune is this is the first time they played it," he says. "They were just sent the music."

Next, Wendelboe talks about an app a friendly collaborator is developing that will allow audience members to vote for best guest talent brought in on any given evening. This night it is a trumpet player who has just graduated from Darien High.

"I don't even know your last name," Wendelboe says.

The young musician says it's Wood, Dominick Wood.

"I have never heard this kid play, and neither have you and that's half the fun," Wendelboe says.

Wood gets up from a table, takes a stance in front of the orchestra and raises his trumpet to his lips. In the course of the piece, "Out of the Night," he will get two solos, his sound brought to the fore, while the band grows quieter in support.

Bringing in young talent is one of Wendelboe's ideas for the Monday night sessions. He says he's just sent a letter to high school and college music programs inviting them to suggest musicians, composers or even entire orchestras.

Wendelboe's larger goal is freshness and passion, which describes the essence of jazz. He wants to get people past Glenn Miller and rigid repetition, or even what might be heard at the famed Village Vanguard in New York.

O'Dowd, who moved his jazz club from New Haven to Stamford last year, says it was the Village Vanguard tradition of devoting Monday nights to big bands that gave him the idea of doing something similar. But not too similar.

"That's where we're kind of unique," O'Dowd says. "Usually the artists come in and ask, 'How many sets? What's the time limit?' I tell them, 'You're the artist, that's why you're here. Be yourself.'"

He says that at 8 p.m., showtime, the place belongs to Wendelboe, who is billed as creative director of the 9th Note Jazz Orchestra. To him, big refers mainly to the size of a band, not any particular type of music.

"It's like a chamber orchestra," he says. "You can write anything for it. I can come in here with Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and write (an arrangement) for them. Is that 'In the Mood'? No. But is it big band? Yes."

O'Dowd and Wendelboe did not know each previously. Before becoming a club owner, O'Dowd, who grew up in Hamden and lives in Redding, ran a catering and events business, the Canterer Caterer, with his wife, Rebecca.

Wendelboe, who was born in Denmark in 1956 and grew up in Norway, came to the U.S. to study at the Manhattan School of Music. His professional resume, as trombonist, composer and arranger, covers several pages. (He was Donna Summer's music director for many years.) He lives in Wilton.

He and O'Dowd were put together by another jazz musician, Per Onnerud, who also lives in Wilton, and played at the 9th Note with his own band.

The lead trumpet player, Onnerud has a day job as a technology executive. He and others helped Wendelboe assemble the band, which draws from a pool of musicians.

The 9th Note Orchestra also features a vocalist, Stephanie Harrison. On the night of the summer solstice show, she did a rendition of Carol King's "Natural Woman" that ended

with one audience member bowing at her feet.

On Monday big-band nights, the \$20 admission fee covers complimentary food between sets.

On the other six nights of the week, the 9th Note, 15 Bank St., Stamford, features other jazz performers and serves dinner. 203- 504-8828.

*Joel Lang is an award-winning Connecticut journalist.*

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