

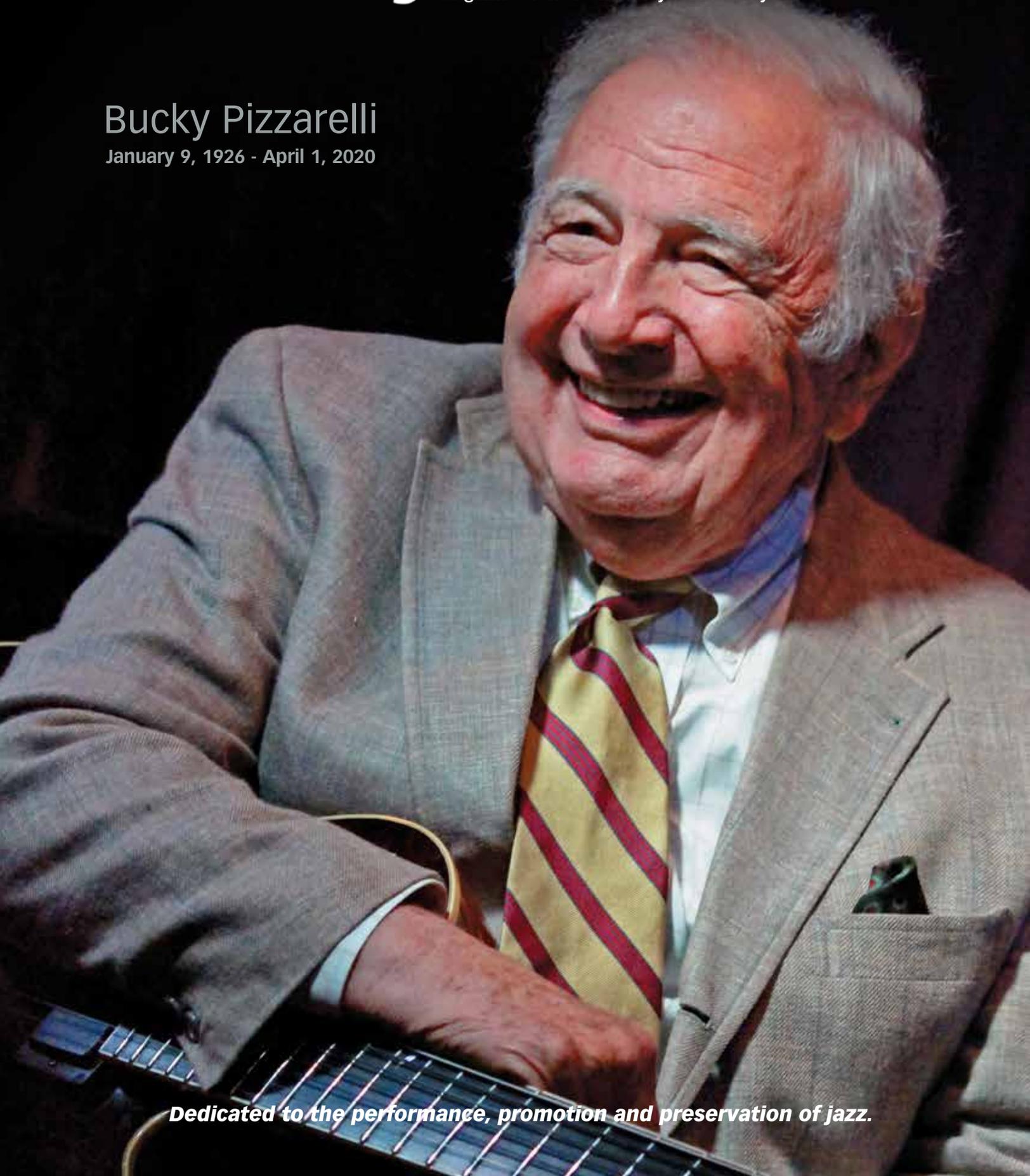
# JerseyJazz

Magazine of the New Jersey Jazz Society

May / June 2020  
Volume 48 Issue 3  
[www.njjs.org](http://www.njjs.org)

Bucky Pizzarelli

January 9, 1926 - April 1, 2020



*Dedicated to the performance, promotion and preservation of jazz.*

## RISING STARS

# The Bright Future of Jazz

By Sanford Josephson

Three members of the New Jersey Youth Symphony Jazz Orchestra and Charles Mingus Combo won Outstanding Soloist awards at the 12th annual Charles Mingus Festival & High School Competition held February 14-17 at The New School of Jazz and at the Jazz Standard in New York City. *Jersey Jazz* recently caught up with all three to talk about their love of jazz and their plans for the future.



Twelve-year-old Ben Collins-Siegel, a student at Maplewood Middle School, started playing piano at the age of four. After taking private lessons for five years from Zev Babbit, his father's music teacher, Collins-Siegel began participating in Montclair's Jazz House Kids program, also taking lessons from pianists Oscar Perez, Radam Schwartz, and Bob Himmelberger.

Drummer Koleby Royston, a junior at Piscataway High School, grew up in a musical family. His mother is jazz pianist Shamie Royston; his father is drummer Rudy Royston; and his aunt (Shamie's sister) is alto saxophonist Tia Fuller. "My mom," he said, "used to tell me stories about how she'd be conducting high school marching and jazz bands while I was still in the womb, so I've literally been around music my entire life." During the summer between seventh and eighth grade, he attended a Jazz House Kids workshop, "and that was when I really decided to get involved in jazz drumming."

Ryoma Takenaga, a 15-year-old sophomore at the Academy for Information Technology in Scotch Plains, began playing upright bass at age 9 and "started focusing on jazz around the same age. Some of my most important teachers were Jose Rodriguez, who taught me the rudiments of upright bass, and Ed Palermo, who introduced me to the endless creativity that jazz has to offer."

Takenaga was inspired by "the important role the bass plays in a jazz band. The bassist is responsible for solidifying the groove, keeping time, and creating harmony at the same time." His jazz hero is Christian McBride. "The way he plays the bass, and the groove he sets for the band continues to fascinate me," Takenaga said. "I have been fortunate enough to personally meet him and talk to him on several occasions . . . Everything from his soloing style to his large and full sound had made an impression on me. Something about his playing style makes you want to tap your foot or move in your seat when you listen to him, and I aspire to become like that one day."

Royston has a long list of drumming idols including Elvin Jones, Philly Joe Jones, Brian Blade, Jeff "Tain" Watts, Corey Fonville, Jerome Jennings, and Mark Whitfield, Jr. Blade, he said, "is probably one of the best drummers in terms of feel I've ever heard. Mark Whitfield Jr.'s creativity is insane. It's amazing how he comes up with such creative ideas on the spot. Corey Fonville's control is out of this world. I was actually fortunate enough to get a couple of lessons from Jerome Jennings last summer. The way he thinks of drums is so profound. When he explains his thought process, it is almost as if he was painting a picture. Every touch, stroke, and rhythm that he plays has some sort of meaning."



Ryoma Takenaga, 3 years ago, w

For Collins-Siegel, it's two legends and one current pianist: Oscar Peterson, Red Garland, and Christian Sands. "My favorite part about Oscar Peterson," he pointed out, "is the way he accompanied singers. For example, on the album, *Ella and Louis* (Verve: 1956), he doesn't play too much to take away from the singing. Also, he knows the type of chords to play to fit the mood of the song. For Red Garland, it's how he comps. For example, on 'Billy Boy', the chords he plays are super interesting. And if you listen to him solo on something like 'Straight No Chaser', he does melodic lines for about the first five choruses. Then, he goes straight to big chords. For Christian Sands, it's the way he puts the rhythm in his left hand and plays melodic lines in his right hand."

All three student musicians played with the JTole Jazz Orchestra at the first annual Roselle Park Jazz Festival, created last July by alto saxophonist Julius Tolentino, who is Director of the New Jersey Youth Symphony Jazz Orchestra and Jazz Director at Newark Academy in Livingston. Royston described Tolentino as, "one of the most influential people in my life when helping me improve my skills as a drummer and as a musician. Mr. Tolentino's

passion for the music and knowledge of its history is what really affected me . . . He knows the language, vocabulary, styles, and sounds of not just his own instrument, but all the common jazz instruments. He allows his students to gain their own voice using the vocabulary he has taught them." At the Roselle Park festival, Royston and Takenaga were featured during the band's performance of Dizzy Gillespie's "Night in Tunisia".

At the festival, Collins-Siegel launched the band's first number, Thad Jones' "Counter Block", with a stride piano solo. "Mr. T.," he said, "has always pushed me to do things even when I thought they were beyond my ability. He has shown me that I am capable of playing more challenging music than I believed was possible." Takenaga had "an amazing time" at the festival. "The audience was awesome, and everyone seemed to be engulfed in the music. Getting to play with [guitarist] Dave Stryker was a remarkable experience."

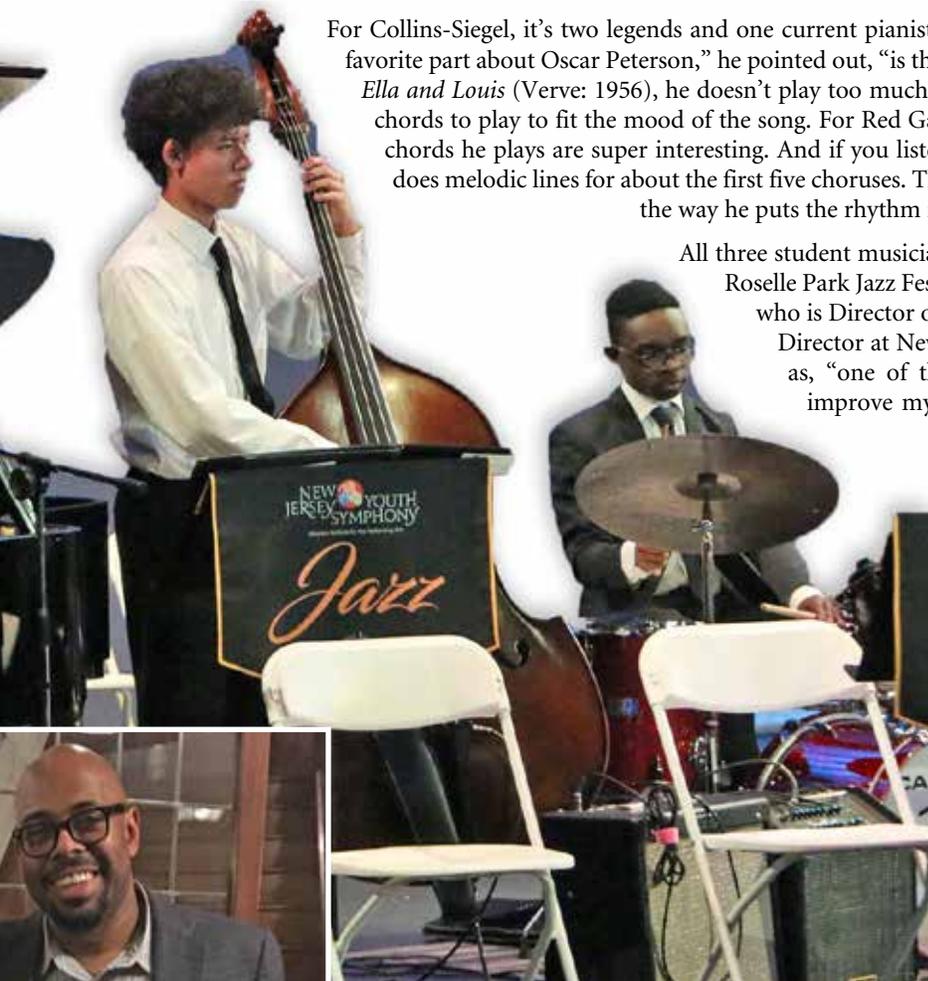
What does the future hold for these three award-winning musicians? "If I were offered the opportunity to become a full-time jazz musician," Takenaga said,

"I would gladly take it, but that is not my first option. While I'm not exactly sure what I am going to do for college, I am currently planning on focusing on the computer sciences." Collins-Siegel plans to continue with music but is also interested in pursuing a career in science. Royston, however, does want to become a full-time jazz musician. "The reality," he acknowledged, "is that doing gigs and nothing else probably won't provide a substantial amount of money, so I want to get into writing as well. Some of the trademark colleges that I have been looking at that provide great instruction for both playing and writing are the New School, Berklee College of Music, and the Peabody Institute."

Finally, what do these young musicians think is the key to attracting more younger audiences to jazz? "I think the best way to attract younger audiences to jazz music," said Royston, "is to simply educate young people about how hip-hop music -- and any music for that matter-- embodies jazz. What I mean by this is that everything is not straight ahead anymore. You have musicians like Robert Glasper, Terrace Martin, Snarky Puppy, and Terence Blanchard who are taking aspects of jazz and sort of integrating them with hip-hop, funk, and R&B. Of course, this has been done many times in the past, but I think it will have an especially profound impact on young people today, since it is more closely related to the hip-hop pop-culture music everyone is exposed to."

The key, added Takenaga, "is showing that jazz is not a complicated art form. Many people are intimidated because it is completely different from all other types of music and can sound difficult, complicated, or even crazy at times. I believe kids should be exposed to all different types of jazz . . . If the music gets them to tap their foot, or even start dancing, then you are on the right path!" Collins-Siegel agreed. "A lot of kids aren't exposed to jazz music, so they don't even realize they would like it," he said. "Bringing them to concerts will allow them to discover how exciting jazz music can be."

In addition to the Soloist awards, the NJYSJO and Charles Mingus Combo won Best Trombone Section and the Mingus Spirit Award at the Mingus Festival. The New Jersey Youth Symphony was founded in 1979 and is a program of the New Providence-based Wharton Institute for the Performing Arts, which serves more than 1,500 students of all ages and abilities. The Jazz Orchestra was formed last year.



From left: Ben Collins-Siegel, Ryoma Takenaga, and Koleby Royston.  
Photo courtesy of Wharton Arts



with his musical hero, Christian McBride.  
Photo by Elinor Takenaga.