



PHOTOS BY LAURA MORTON

Georgi Sivulka, left, and Daniel Lavery, right, dance with resident Irene Woodward as the band the Jazz Therapists play the song "Goodnight Irene" in honor of her at Merrill Gardens at Rockridge assisted living facility in Oakland. The group, made up of seven Bay Area musicians, plays pre-1945 American jazz music.

# Jazz Therapists create memorable musical moments at East Bay senior centers

By Marcus Crowder

When experiencing a Jazz Therapists gig, it can be hard to tell who is having a better time — the audiences gathered in the many senior care centers around the East

Bay where the seven-piece band performs or the group of professional jazz musicians, several seniors themselves, performing classic music of a bygone era. "Everybody loves the band, and we love doing

this," Grammy-winning trombonist Mike Rinta said. "I've been making my living all my life playing music, and this is one of my all-time favorite gigs because I express myself through music." Rinta, who was born in

San Francisco, is the band's arranger and musical director. Over the years, he has been with the Tommy Castro Band, Harvey Mandel and the Zasu Pitts Memorial Orchestra. He's shared stages with legends such as Carlos Santana, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Buddy Guy, Arturo Sandoval, Taj Mahal and Bob Weir while touring around the world playing music. With the Jazz Therapists, he's playing at Carlton Senior Living in San Leandro, Cardinal Point in Alameda, North Berkeley

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Anna de Leon, Jazz Therapists singer on their senior center audiences

Senior Center in Berkeley and Piedmont Gardens in Oakland to name a few. The band performs for a population that might not be able to otherwise access live music.

"What we're doing for the seniors, it's a service," Rinta said. The Therapists have become extremely popular since they started playing in 2015 with a

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Ida Chervellera, right, dances with Georgi Sivulka as the Jazz Therapists play "Ida (Sweet as Apple Cider)," in honor of her at Merrill Gardens at Rockridge.



Above: The Jazz Therapists play at Merrill Gardens at Rockridge in Oakland on Feb. 4. Below left: Lincoln Adler plays the saxophone while performing with other members of the Jazz Therapists. Below right: Merrill Gardens Active Living Program Director Georgi Sivulka, center, dances with Ginger Reiber, right, and Dolly Chew.

regular schedule of performances that keeps the band on the go. They've restricted themselves to the East Bay since everyone in the band lives there and crossing the Bay Bridge can be challenging and time consuming.

"We do anywhere from two to five gigs in a week, and it's generally about 12 a month," Rinta said.

Other band members are Rob Schwartz on guitar, Mark Williams on bass, David Rokeach on drums, Lincoln Adler on sax and Ben Stolorow on

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Left: Ida Chervellera holds a signed copy of sheet music for the song "Ida (Sweet as Apple Cider)," that was presented to her by the Jazz Therapists. Above: Anna de Leon sings while performing with other members of the seven-person band.

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piano. Anna de Leon, who is the group's singer and unofficial historian, said the Jazz Therapists were started almost accidentally by Bob Schwartz. Born in 1925, Bob Schwartz was a jazz lover from Chicago who played clarinet and tenor sax during his high school and college years but stopped after joining the

Navy during World War II. He moved to Oakland in 1951 becoming a successful businessman and entrepreneur. In 1999, he was a lapsed saxophonist in his early 80s living in the Oakland Hills when he gained Ethiopian jazz pianist Elias Negash as a neighbor. Bob Schwartz heard Negash playing and asked if he could join in. "And that's what they

did every Saturday," de Leon said. Then a former activities director at a senior center, who walked her dog on the street, heard them playing. "She knocked on the door and said, 'You know, you should be doing this at senior facilities.' That's how it started. Bob assembled a band, and I'm the singer he called," de Leon said. When Bob Schwartz

died in 2017, he left provisions in his trust for the band to continue with his financial support. He also financed three albums of the band's performances: "Love You Madly," "Comeback Jazz" and "Comeback Jazz with Dance." Within the band is a belief that there is a deeper value to the performances. "Bob was insistent on that," de Leon said. "He

named the band the Jazz Therapists because he believed we reached people. The music not only touched them, but it allowed them to wake up memories and then be more in community with each other while they lived there. It's noticeable — even people who have no speech, many in wheelchairs, they're tapping their hands on their chairs. "We encourage them

to sing along. I always encourage them to dance," she said. "I say if you just want to wiggle in your seat, that's OK too." The group focuses on music made before 1945, which de Leon said, "was Bob's mission, and we still continue that." The only song they play from outside that era is "What a Wonderful World" made famous by Louis Armstrong. "Bob loved that song,



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Above: Merrill Gardens Active Living Program Director Georgi Sivulka, left, and Ginger Reiber dance to the Jazz Therapists. Below: David Rokeach plays the drums.





Clockwise from top left: Anna de Leon sings as Mark Williams plays the string base while performing with the Jazz Therapists; Georgi Sivulka, left, and Daniel Lavery, right, dance with Merrill Gardens at Rockridge resident Irene Woodward as the band plays "Goodnight Irene" in honor of her; Mike Rinta presents a copy of sheet music for the song "Ida (Sweet as Apple Cider)," to Ida Chervellera that he arranged in her honor; Ida Chervellera, left, and Dolly Chew clap along to the music.



so we end almost every show with that," de Leon said.

Other songs they perform are "A Foggy Day," "Blue Skies," "They All Laughed," "Angel Eyes," and "Goodnight, Irene." The set list changes for each performance, and the band continually learns new material, which are often audience requests.

The band plays at senior centers across the East Bay, but one of their favorites is Elder Ashram

in Oakland.

"They have a wonderful outdoor facility and just the nicest staff," de Leon said. "They bring out hors d'oeuvres, lots of people are dancing. The place is just incredible. It's like a big party."

Because the band has played in the same places for years, they've seen changes in the audiences over time. There was a man de Leon remembered who could dance and talk a couple of years ago, but now he can't do

any of those things.

"He sits in a wheelchair, his wife comes and visits. She doesn't live there, but she always comes to the gigs we do there," de Leon said. "The last time we were there, she said to me, 'You've seen John change haven't you? He loved to dance.' ... This time he was sitting there and when we started playing, he moved his thumbs. That's very moving. It brought me to tears."

While the Therapists

are favorites wherever they play, the band has no bigger fans than Ida Chervellera and Dolly Chew who live at Merrill Gardens at Rockridge in Oakland.

"I enjoy the people themselves," Chervellera said. "I'm so happy for them because they really wake us all up here when they come. They're so friendly, so nice."

Therapists' arranger Rinta has worked up a version of the old jazz tune "Ida (Sweet as Apple

Cider)," which the band plays during their Merrill Gardens performances. Rinta even wrote out the musical score, which the band signed and gave to Ida.

"I'll be 100 this year, so my family is very happy that they'll have something to sing to me on my 100th birthday. It's a rumba," Chervellera said.

Dolly Chew also has her own song ("Hello Dolly!"), which the band plays for her.

"They work together very well as a group and individually because they have their own parts," Chew said. "I've talked to them after their performance, and they enjoy coming here. I can relate to most of their songs, and they just do a real good job in their presentation. I wish we could have them more often, but I know they have a very heavy schedule. They say, 'if you know the songs, join us and sing along,' and we do."

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