

Happy 86th Birthday Marty Grosz

By Lynn Redmile

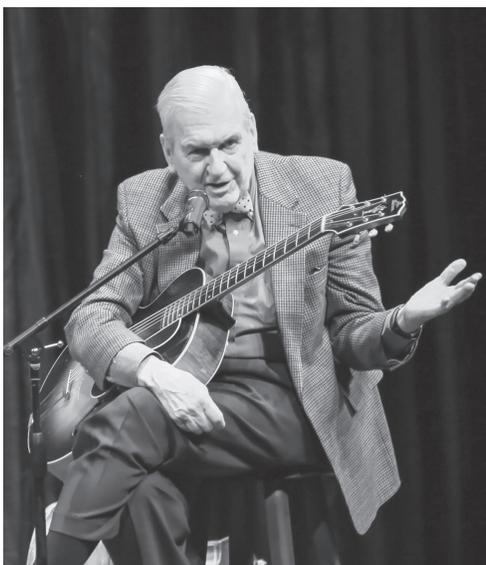
It's not often you will hear Thomas Fats Waller introduced as "that ponderous pachyderm at the piano, that elephantine elf of the ivories, that mastodon of mirth, that caliph of the keys, that Sultan of the Steinway, that Bwana of the Bösendorfer, that guru of the groupettos, that Emir of the escape tones, that Pasha of the pralltrillers, that Hammurabi of the hacha, that wazir of whoopie, that Nebuchadnezzar of nonsense." But if you're listening to the legendary Marty Grosz, acoustic guitarist and one of jazz music's great comedians, you'll hear it, as we did when we celebrated his 86th birthday recently.

Born in 1930 in Berlin, Martin Oliver "Marty" Grosz came to New York with his brother and parents in 1933. His father, George Grosz, was one of the principal artists associated with the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) movement, and was a member of the Berlin Dada group. Influenced by his service as a soldier in WWI, George's art from the Weimar era was social critique, and he continued his criticism of the decay of German society with his involvement in left wing pacifist activity and participation in protests and social upheavals. Seeing the writing on the wall, George moved his family to New York in 1933, just before Hitler took power, and continued teaching art.

Young Marty grew up in New York, and at the age of eight began playing ukulele. A few years later, he heard a recording of guitarist Bernard Addison's shuffle-beat behind Roy Eldridge's trumpet, and quickly replaced his ukulele with a banjo and guitar. He attended Columbia University, and by the time he was 21, he was leading a Dixieland band with stride pianist Dick Wellstood and the veteran New Orleans bassist Pops Foster. After military service, he relocated to Chicago. Through the 1950s and '60s, he performed with the likes of Albert Ammons, Floyd O'Brien and Jim Lannigan, and recorded with Dave Remington, Art Hodes and Albert Nicholas, as well as Jabbo Smith. Returning to New York in the 1970s, he joined Soprano Summit, with Bob Wilber and Kenny Davern, and gained greater visibility on the national jazz scene. Pre-bop standards and obscurities were passionately performed with the band as it toured, and prior to their breakup in 1979, the band had recorded for Chiaroscuro, Jazzology, Concord, Fat Cat's Jazz, and a third album for World Jazz — you'll find the Chiaroscuro and Concord sets rereleased on CD. *Let Your Fingers Do The Walking* and *Goody Goody* were acoustic guitar duet LPs recorded with lefty rhythm player with Wayne Wright.

In the late 1970s, Marty resumed working with Dick Wellstood and established a new and musically rewarding partnership with jazz cornetist Dick Sudhalter. He continued to freelance for a number of years, including a stint with the New York Jazz Repertory Orchestra directed by Dick Hyman — Marty played with the orchestra at the White House. By 1986, Marty, Wellstood and Sudhalter were performing together as The Classic Jazz Quartet along with clarinetist Joe Muryani. Sadly, Dick Wellstood's untimely passing in 1987 ended the band, but in that short time, they recorded two albums, one for Jazzology and one for Stomp Off. These recordings were re-released in a 2-disc set in 1995, entitled *The Classic Jazz Quartet: The Complete Recordings*.

Marty started the Orphan Newsboys, a wonderful quartet with cornetist Peter Ecklund, clarinetist Bobby Gordon and bassist Greg Cohen. He played, sang and



Guitarist/raconteur Marty Grosz on stage at Ocean County College's Midweek Jazz in March 2016. Photo by Lynn Redmile.

wrote most of the group's arrangements. The band performed extensively, recorded two albums for Jazzology (*Extra!* in 1989 and *Live at the L.A. Classic* in 1994) and recorded *Laughing at Life* in 1991 for Stomp Off. Marty continues to perform and has appeared at guitar concerts with such greats as Joe Pass, Herb Ellis and Charlie Byrd.

More recently, Marty has been recording with various groups around the country, and performing in and around Philadelphia and New Jersey, often with Danny Tobias on trumpet/cornet. Bassist Ed Wise accompanied Marty for many years, but since Ed's relocation to New Orleans, that seat is usually filled by Joe Plowman, a Philadelphia bassist. Marty's Web site (www.martygrosz.com) keeps fans updated regarding his upcoming concerts.

Marty Grosz is widely recognized as one of today's foremost jazz rhythm guitarists and chord soloists. His style of performance and playing is unique — he doesn't use an amplifier (he uses stand-alone mics as there are no pickups on his guitar or banjo). In addition, his driving rhythm is executed in a tuning similar to that of 1940s rhythm guitar master Carl Kress, with his strings tuned at wider

intervals in the lower register, in fifths as with a tenor banjo (Bb, F, C, G) while the top strings are tuned to B and D, giving a top G major triad. That brilliant acoustic guitar style and chordal solos, coupled with his often-hilarious spontaneous monologues, and Fats Waller-esque vocal style (sometimes raucous, sometimes a whisper, often mischievous with a sense of the absurd) are what brings enthusiastic fans to pack his venues.

And pack it they did, at the Mermaid Inn in Chestnut Hill, PA on March 11 to celebrate Marty's 86th birthday! Accompanied by Danny Tobias on trumpet, Joe Plowman on bass, Jim Lawlor on drums and special guest Dan Block on reeds, the band opened with "As Long As I Live" and followed with "Buddy Bolden Blues". Marty gave his inimitable introduction of a Fats Waller piece "How Can You Face Me Now" and stated the song would be played with "dispatch and vigor", indicating that Danny was "Dispatch" and Dan was "Vigor"! A beautiful rendition of "Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams" showcasing exquisite harmonies between Danny and Dan was followed by a medley of Waller's "I Wish That I Were Twins" and Walter Hirsch's "San." Marty's monologues always lend an intimate feel to all his concerts, letting us feel as though we're gathered in his (large) living room, listening to his banter, and this evening was no different. "All My Life" was preceded by "Doin' the New Low Down". Jimmie Noone's "Apex Blues" gave Dan a great canvas to decorate with his reed mastery. Jim relieved Marty from vocals with a performance of "Exactly Like You" but after, Marty was his usual comedic self, singing "It's a Sin to Tell a Lie." Another great monologue had the audience in giggles, and "South" was followed by "Sunny Side of the Street." The band closed out with a favorite, Hoagy Carmichael's "Jubilee" but the audience wasn't content to end the evening then, and an encore in the poignant form of Horace Gerlach and Louis Armstrong's "If We Never Meet Again" finally satisfied them. Cupcakes for the birthday boy and everyone was a sweet "cherry on the top" of a wonderful evening of celebration and music.

Marty is scheduled to play at the Mermaid Inn in Philadelphia on May 27. If you can make it, you're guaranteed an evening to remember. 