

# The Jazz Bridge Project: A Medley of Advocacy and Aid

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## About The Jazz Bridge Project

The Jazz Bridge Project is a nonprofit organization that brings jazz enthusiasts together with jazz vocalists and musicians in crisis. Founded by jazz musicians Suzanne Cloud and Wendy Simon, Jazz Bridge's mission is to assist local jazz performers with emergencies involving personal and professional issues, while building neighborhood awareness of the local jazz community. Jazz Bridge funds this mission via merchandise sales, neighborhood concerts, donations and grant funding.

## Jazz and Poverty

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If asked about their profession, many jazz musicians would tell you that having embarked on their chosen career is the same thing as having taken a vow of poverty. In a March 2012 *New York Times* article, author James C. McKinley Jr. spoke of "the plight of elderly jazz musicians who lack pension benefits" (McKinley 2012). According to a survey done by the Future of Music Coalition, independent jazz musicians on average made

approximately \$23,000 in 2011 (JJA Editor 2012). On December 13, 1995, the *Philadelphia Weekly* began its first annual jazz issue by saying "No group in this city has been as consistently undernourished and underappreciated as the jazz community" (Adler 2008).

Founded in 2005 as a response to a call to action felt by Wendy Simon and Suzanne Cloud, the Jazz Bridge Project attempts to fill the needs of an impoverished jazz community (Cloud 2012). Often living and working without health insurance or retirement benefits, many musicians rely on the aid provided by Jazz Bridge to overcome such hurdles as terminal illness, legal issues, sub-standard living conditions and navigating complex municipal systems.

## **Supporting Philadelphia's Jazz Community**

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When asked about the significance of jazz and jazz musicians in Philadelphia, Suzanne Cloud said, "Jazz is America's only original cultural export to the world and Philadelphia is a historic city in that it helped give birth to the genre of hard bop and gave the jazz genius John Coltrane to the world. There are only a few American cities that can claim to have made a large footprint in American jazz, and Philadelphia is one of them."

Since its origin, the Jazz Bridge Project has helped over 250 people in person and provided resources to hundreds more online. Jazz Bridge helps people of all ages and with all types of issues. In a *JazzTimes* article by Nat Hentoff, Cloud and Simon said, "We've helped musicians get medical and dental care, eye exams and legal help. We replaced drummer Billy James' drum set when he lost everything in a fire, and bought him a new suit so he could continue playing gigs. And we've paid funeral costs for local, yet famous, musicians whose families could not afford to bury them" (Hentoff 2008).

Buying drums and paying funeral cost are examples of only one half of the Jazz Bridge Project's bicameral mission to assist local jazz performers with emergencies involving personal and professional issues, while building neighborhood awareness of the local jazz community.

The organization's attention to both parts of its dual-pronged mission has helped grow its neighborhood concert series from one to five locations.

These locations include:

- Kennett Square at the Kennett Square Flash,
- Media, PA at the Unitarian Universalist Church,
- Center City Philadelphia at the Society Hill Playhouse,
- Cheltenham, PA at the Cheltenham Center for the Arts, and
- Collingswood, PA at the Collingswood Community

Center.

One specific example of the support Jazz Bridge has provided members of the Philadelphia jazz community is documented in a story published in the *Newark Star-Ledger* about accomplished jazz musician and 91-year-old great-grandfather of six, Charlie Rice (Braun 2008). After Charlie was suspended from his job and charged with stealing gas from the Camden school board, he contacted the Jazz Bridge Project looking for aid in finding legal representation. With Jazz Bridge's assistance, an attorney worked on Charlie's case for over a year, after which the state dropped the charges and Charlie never went to trial.

Some issues aren't quickly remedied and demand long-term attention, such as the 14 months it took to resolve Charles Ellerbe's matter. In April 2009, Ellerbe reached out to Jazz Bridge regarding the deed to his home, and mentioned some physical issues with the house. Suzanne Cloud went over to view the dwelling and found the two vacant houses on either side leaning on Ellerbe's home. Working together, Ellerbe and Jazz Bridge contacted various municipal, nonprofit and political personnel (some repeatedly) for months. The support and thoroughness of the Jazz Bridge Project paid off when demolition of the two vacant houses on either side of Charles' home began on February 26, 2011 (Cloud 2011).

## **Localized Jazz Advocacy and Social**

# Services

## Localized Jazz Advocacy and Social Services

Jazz Bridge is a localized jazz advocacy machine. Unlike larger, more well-known organizations, like the Jazz Foundation of America, the Jazz Bridge Project prides itself on its family-friendly, neighborhood approach to driving awareness and providing support in crisis.

Jazz advocacy is not a new concept. Local jazz festivals, neighborhood jazz performances, national jazz day events and even jazz appreciation month have been around for years. What's different about Jazz Bridge is their neighborhood approach to getting the word out and making jazz and jazz-related issues a part of everyday life. The Jazz Bridge Project has made real strides in letting people know about not only the events but also the artists in their own backyards. Amazing performers, in some cases living right next door, are able to share their talents during interactive, family-friendly neighborhood concerts at local venues.

Jazz Bridge maintains its commitment to driving awareness and providing support in crisis by collaborating with greater Philadelphia area venues, such as the upcoming Jazz Photography exhibition at the Kimmel Center, and strategizing with national organizations. Suzanne Cloud and Wendy Simon have an ongoing

relationship with Wendy Oxenhorn and the Jazz Foundation of America, whom they credit as "a great inspiration and help" (Hentoff 2008).

## **In the Future**

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The neighborhood concert series has grown and the Jazz Bridge Project has various success stories like those of Charles Ellerbe and Charlie Rice under its belt. However, the nonprofit's co-founders have set their sights on diversifying their contribution to the Greater Philadelphia area.

At some point co-founders Suzanne Cloud and Wendy Simon hope to establish a multi-purpose structure that will contain artistic space for musical expression, living quarters for aging jazz musicians, educational areas for young jazz enthusiasts, and office space for Jazz Bridge (Cloud 2012).

Exciting new events include the first ever Philadelphia jazz photography exhibition at the Kimmel Center. The exhibition, called "Philly Jazz: A View Through the Lens," to be shown on the main plaza of the Kimmel Center throughout the month of April, which is National Jazz Appreciation Month. The photographers being spotlighted in this show are Anthony Dean, Ben Johnson, Howard Pitkow and L. David Hinton. An annual fundraiser was also

held on April 27, 2012 at Chris's Jazz Café to support the organization.

## **About the Innovators**

**Besides being the executive director and co-founder of Jazz Bridge, Suzanne Cloud is also a published author, educator, and presenter/lecturer. She is currently an adjunct professor at Rowan University (American Studies program, History Department and the Writing Arts Department); a grant/proposal writer and executive director for Jazz Bridge and a frequent contributor to the Philadelphia Inquirer and columnist for JazzTimes magazine. Prior to her work with Jazz Bridge, she was a jazz singer-songwriter with more than a few recording projects and reviews to her name.**

**Wendy Simon is an accomplished vocalist, lecturer, choreographer, and teacher with decades of music-related experience under her belt. She is currently a Music Educator at Springfield Township Middle School where she established the music curriculum for grades 5-7, directs and conducts two mixed choirs and creates/directs all drama workshops and musical and dramatic stage productions. Prior to this she was an adjunct professor at Arcadia University where she established curriculum for the contemporary vocal ensemble and conducted concerts. Before that she**

led workshops on "Jazz Vocal Styles for Broadway", composed arrangements and taught vocal techniques for the musical theater department at the University of the Arts Master Class as an instructor. Wendy has also been featured in various jingles, studio recordings and concerts throughout her career.

## References

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