

April 2003

All That Jazz: Vinnie Martucci composes and improvises a life in music

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Recommended Citation

Wilson, David McKay (2003) "All That Jazz: Vinnie Martucci composes and improvises a life in music," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 92 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol92/iss3/6>

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All That Jazz

Vinnie Martucci—composes and improvises—a life in music

On stage in a cozy New York club with his most recent quartet and jazz singer Laurel Massé, Vinnie Martucci '77 leads the band through an eclectic set of tunes. The set is more than an interesting mix. It's a road map of Martucci's ever-changing musical career.

They play a Beatles classic, and it could conjure up Martucci playing the Chez Paree in Waterville when he had shoulder-length hair. A sultry rhythm-and-blues ballad comes from Martucci's days on the road in the late 1970s with the funk band The Hitchhikers. The band swings with a Cole Porter jazz standard and Martucci, his black shirt buttoned neatly to the neck, could be back playing in a cavernous theater at a Catskills resort, paying his dues through the 1980s. And when the group launches into one of Martucci's own post-bop jazz compositions, it's déjà vu from his time touring Europe with jazz legend Dave Brubeck and Brubeck's sons.

It's a winding path that Martucci has followed, but in the years since he arrived at Colby, he's never strayed from his passion—music and playing for an audience. "Performing gives me the perfect blend of interaction with people, a sense of spiritual direction and the intricacies of mathematics all wrapped into one thing," Martucci said. "When you're improvising, and things are flying all around the room, the place gets energized, you're communicating with the audience, and they literally resonate with it."

It's been 30 years since Martucci showed up at Foss Hall prepared to pursue pre-med studies. Music soon sidetracked him and by the middle of his sophomore year he left for Boston to study at the Berklee School of Music. He then moved to New York City, hoping to study with Brubeck. The jazz pianist, though, didn't take students and instead referred him to study with John Mehegan in Connecticut. A year later, Martucci returned to Colby to complete his studies, but now music—not medicine—was his major.

By 1980 Martucci had found what he thought was a temporary home in Woodstock, N.Y. He had come to work and study at the Creative Music Studio, which for its brief life was the artistic haven for such avant-garde jazz luminaries as Marion Brown, Jack DeJohnette, Steve Lacy and Hamiett Bluiett. Martucci studied and played with these masters while also serving as the school's registrar. But the school closed in the early '80s when the federal government cut back severely on arts funding, leaving Martucci with a growing passion for music but no way to earn a living doing it.

Like the jazz musician he is, Martucci improvised. He found work with a lounge act at the nearby Pines resort in the Catskills (where Robert Goulet and Tito Puente once were regulars), and for six years

he played sets that included funk and soul, polkas and waltzes.

During those years, Martucci was introduced to one of Dave Brubeck's sons, Dan, a drummer who also lived near Woodstock. They formed a jazz fusion group called The Dolphins, which recorded several albums and toured the United States, Europe and South America—occasionally with the legendary Dave Brubeck Quartet. One night in Austria, before an audience of 10,000, an ailing Dave Brubeck asked Martucci to play the opening number with the famed quartet. Martucci was going places, but he decided the road was no place for him: The Dolphins broke up in 1996 after the birth of his first child. "Vinnie was always kind of joyous; he's that kind of cat," said Dan Brubeck. "But he got to a point where he wanted to be home with his kids."

And that's where Martucci has stayed, most of the time, having learned that it takes more than talent and dedication to stay on the musical stage all these years. He's also needed an entrepreneurial spirit, a juggler's knack for keeping several balls in the air at one time and a supportive spouse who understands the life of an artist. He met his wife, Liz Lawrence '77, a potter, during their freshman year at Colby.

Now Martucci teaches jazz history part-time and teaches a dozen private piano students at the State University of New York at New Paltz. He accompanies Massé on a monthly live show on WAMC in Albany. He records for himself and others in his studio. It's all music, all the time.

Martucci regularly plays live gigs with Massé, and that can take him away from his home for brief spells—a benefit this past July on Chebeague Island in Casco Bay, a weeklong stand in Los Angeles, the Detroit Jazz Festival. Martucci also does a cabaret act with Eileen Fulton, a soap opera star on *As the World Turns*. His own jazz trio performs in upstate New York and the Berkshires. He also plays an occasional wedding, including one a year ago at which his daughter, Katie, then 8, accompanied him on the violin.

For Martucci, that was, in some ways, a crowning moment in his long career.

"We have about forty tunes now—from 'Norwegian Wood' to 'Ode to Joy' to 'The Tennessee Waltz'—and we also jam on some blues," he said. "She even gives me notes on pieces, telling me to hold notes a little longer. This is more fun than anyone should be allowed to have."

David McKay Wilson '76 is a senior writer for The Journal News in White Plains, N.Y., and writes for alumni magazines around the country.



By David McKay Wilson '76
Photograph by Carolina Salguero