

Armen Donelian is fluent in the language of jazz

By DAVID LEE

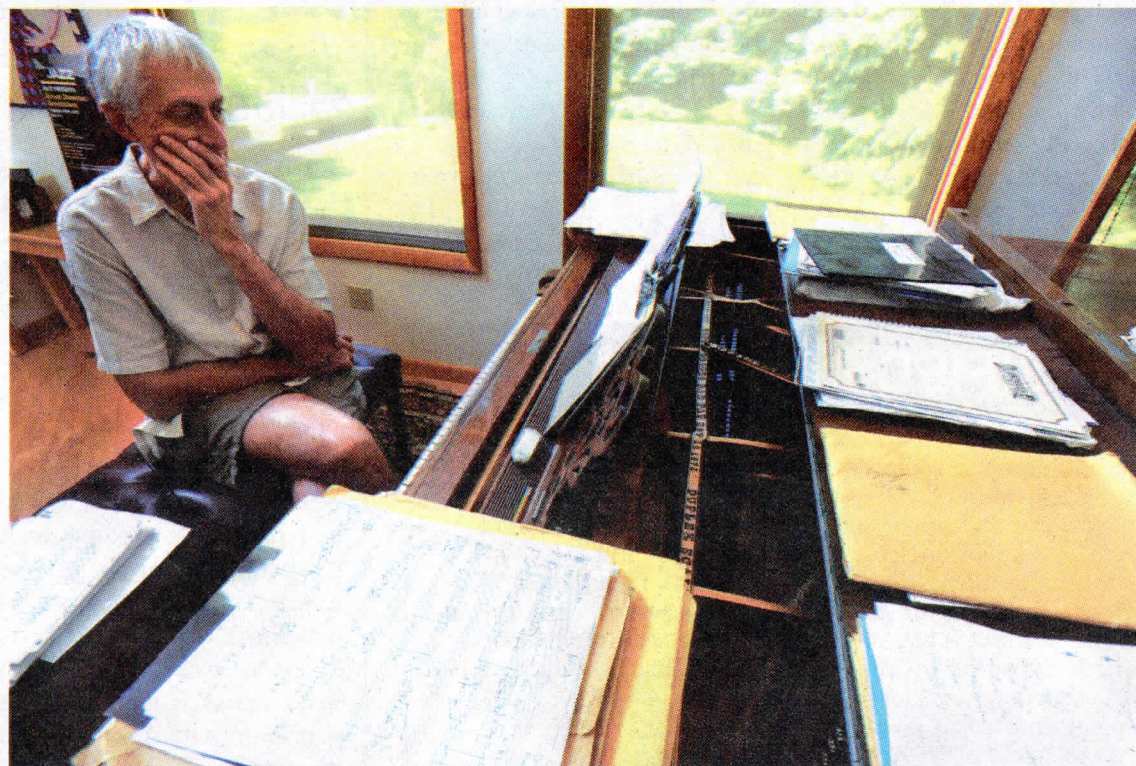
ARMEN DONELIAN sits at his Steinway grand piano, dips his fingers into the keys and brings out a stately rendition of a John Philip Sousa march.

"Jazz," says Donelian, "combines the African traditions of rhythm and blues with European traditions such as this Sousa march."

As he speaks, he transforms the march chords with syncopation and melody into Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag." Donelian, a pianist, arranger and author, has taught at the New School for over 20 years. A thoroughly professional musician in performance, he is equally patient and comfortable in his Greenport studio talking about the most basic principles of his discipline with a relative neophyte.

"Jazz is oral and aural," he says. "Until musicians were advanced enough to write notes, music was transmitted aurally on the bandstand in performance. So much of what they played was informed by what they heard going on."

Explaining the process of jazz improvisation, Donelian compared it to language: "We use the tools of language, grammar and vocabulary to express ourselves in the moment, and jazz musicians do the same, using melody, harmony, rhythm and composing spontaneously."



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Armen Donelian, pianist, arranger and author, in his Greenport studio. The studio is home to the annual Hudson Jazz Workshop, which starts on Thursday, August 11 and culminates with a public performance Sunday, August 14 at 3 p.m. at the Hudson Opera House.

In July Donelian was preparing for the 10th anniversary session of the Hudson Jazz Workshop, a four-day musical retreat he conducts with his co-artistic director, tenor saxophonist and bandleader Marc Mommaas. Each summer about 10 students take up residence in the Donelian home, situated amid fields and orchards in Greenport. They receive the undivided attention of the two teachers, and of the third member of the HJW Board of Directors, Rose Caldwell, who, in addition to

being married to Donelian, is the HJW gourmet chef, travel agent and general manager of affairs.

Donelian and Mommaas met in 2000 at the Manhattan School of Music and did a memorial concert after 9/11. Since then they have played duets and concerts and made a duo recording on Sunnyside Records. In 2007 they started the HJW. Mommaas also conducts his own New York Jazz Workshop in Queens, where he lives.

Workshop students are at an

advanced level of proficiency with their instruments. This year students from Nigeria and Denmark join local musicians. They play a variety of instruments, except for drums, because of space limitations.

The workshop convenes Thursday evening, August 11. For the next two days work continues from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. with a focus on duets, trios and small group improvisation.

The workshop culminates with a public performance, with a guest musician and art-

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ists' talk, Sunday, August 14 at 3 p.m. at the Hudson Opera House, 327 Warren Street. Admission is \$10, free to students. This year's guest is Chris Washburne, a trombone player, ethnomusicologist and director of the jazz performance program at Columbia University.

Also on August 14, at 10:30 a.m., Washburne conducts a master class at the HJW studio, open to the public for \$10 (free to students). Seating is limited and registration required, at 518 822-1640.

"An explosion of media—archives and recordings—has transformed jazz education," says Donelian. "Our job as educators is more one of guidance. The workshop gives students a venue in which to explore ideas. We're there just for the sake of the music."

But the Sunday performance has tremendous value, he says. "Magic happens when we play together in a studio, and then have a place to put it out in front of the public. Something crystallizes and comes together in an extraordinary concert."