

Christmas in August: Josh Duffee Plays in Three Bands at the 2012 Bix Jazz Festival

Written by Jeff Ignatius
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Josh Duffee admits that his Bix Beiderbecke Memorial Jazz Festival schedule is intense. The 32-year-old percussionist will be playing with three groups and performing more than a dozen times over five days, but he said it's not exhausting.

“Usually, by Monday, I’m feeling it a little bit, but ... it’s kind of like Christmas for me,” he said in a phone interview last week. “I’m going to take advantage of every single second I can get, and if I can sleep on Tuesday, August 7, then I’ll go ahead and do that.”

The Bix fest opens on Thursday, August 2, with a full slate of concerts the three days after that and an event on Monday, August 6: a show at one of Bix’s old haunts – Jim’s Knoxville Tap, formerly known as the Bluebird Inn – on the 81st anniversary of his death at age 28. Most concerts will be held in the RiverCenter, the Adler Theatre, and LeClaire Park. (For a full schedule of events, visit BixSociety.org/festival.html .)

Duffee will, of course, be leading his own 12-member orchestra, but he’ll also be playing with the Jimmy Valentine Quintet and Andy Schumm & His Flatland Gang. His packed itinerary is a reminder that traditional jazz – and specifically the jazz of the 1920s – is in good hands.

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Duffee's clear enthusiasm and obvious dedication ensure that the music of Bix's time will be heard for a long time.

Duffee said that he got his first exposure to traditional jazz at age 15, but he didn't attend the Bix fest until after high-school graduation in 1998 as member of the Bix Youth Jazz Band. "Every time the Bix fest would be taking place," he said, "that's when we would be taking a family vacation to Minnesota" – timed to coincide with a Deere & Company plant shutdown.

But that first Bix, he said, was "like heaven. ... I think I listened to almost every single band. I even forgot to eat my meals."

He started Josh Duffee & His Orchestra in 2001, and even in his early 20s he showed an unexpected maturity. When he called musicians to be in the band, he said, he crossed people off his list whose first question was how much he was paying; he wanted people who were excited about playing the music.

And a year later, Duffee said, his outfit was the first local band to play the main stage at the Bix fest in more than 30 years.

Duffee said that when he first started his ensemble, he had 45 charts for arrangements of songs – many from Vince Giordano, known for his musical appearances on *A Prairie Home Companion*, Woody Allen films, and HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*.

"Now," he said, "I'm up to about 5,000." People from around the world offer him charts – which is important because you can't find them in music stores. A widow in Oregon, for example, sent him her late husband's library.

Outside of concert appearances, Duffee said, people learn about him from YouTube videos, which he said are the "new calling card. ... You tell people, 'Go to YouTube; you can actually

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see what I do.”

They're attracted to his youth and his authenticity, from his playing style to how he styles his hair. (“I kind of look the part,” he said.)

Duffee said he's preparing to record a new CD for release in 2013, with the goal of showcasing different styles and bands of his favorite era. Music from that period survives, he said, but it's hard for many modern listeners to get past the sound quality of recordings from eight or nine decades ago.

Hearing the music as part of an audience, he said, removes that barrier: “It's better to have a group like mine that can reintroduce the music to the community, and you don't hear it in the form of a 78; you actually hear musicians playing it live.”

When I asked Duffee whether he thinks he was born at the wrong time, he admitted that “we would've given our left arm to have been able to see those bands playing and been a part of that. ... But I also then turn it around and look at it like I was born at this time to keep the music going of the '20s – kind of a torchbearer.”