

## “John Clayton’s Jazz Continuum” by T.C. Coffey

The California Jazz Foundation has been invested in the jazz community for just over a decade, giving financial, counseling and material aid to almost 200 musicians in need. They’re here to help and they don’t take their role as an aid organization lightly.

The tax-exempt, non-profit 501(c)(3) group is sustained through memberships and donations. “Give the Band a Hand,” its annual fundraiser, is a major source of revenue. Each year the evening acknowledges deserving figures in the music—Catalina’s proprietor Catalina Popescu, Ruth Price of the Jazz Bakery, musicians Corky Hale and Mike Stoller—with a one-of-a-kind award. The CJF presents its recipients with the Nica, named for the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter, the famed New York City jazz patron for an untold number of jazz musicians.

The CJF board doesn’t select an honoree for its Nica capriciously. They single out indispensable, philanthropic figures in California jazz for much-deserved recognition. Accordingly, John Clayton is the honoree of the 2016 Nica, and the Gala’s man of the evening.

As a bassist, composer, arranger and bandleader—he’s been an indispensable figure in contemporary jazz. As a teacher (at USC and UCLA), artistic director (for the Port Townsend Jazz Workshop, the Vail Jazz Workshop and the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival), he’s had an incalculable effect of countless developing young musicians. John Clayton’s importance to contemporary jazz can scarcely be overestimated.

This year’s Gala takes place Saturday, April 2 at the Los Angeles Hotel Downtown. The lavish evening features a cocktail hour, a silent auction, a live auction, and a sumptuous dinner. Ticket holders will hear music by the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra, a tribute by Gerald Clayton, an all-star ad hoc group representing just a few of the many young musicians who John has mentored (pianist Adam Bravo, saxophonist Grace Kelly, guitarist Graham Dechter, and bassist Christoph Luty), and a jazz ensemble from California Institute of the Arts.

Renowned singer Steve Tyrell emcees; CJF board member—composer/guitarist Greg Porée—is the evening’s musical director. The event’s honorary dinner chairs are Terry Gibbs, Jeff Hamilton, Plas Johnson, Lainie Kazan, Michael Lazaroff, Plas Johnson, Cathy and Howard Stone, and Billy Dee Williams.

A new feature of the Gala will be inaugurated this year: the CJF’s Heritage Award, paying tribute to jazz figures of historic import. Bass innovator Ray Brown, Clayton’s primary mentor, is the deserving posthumous recipient. His widow, Cecilia Brown, will accept for him.

The estimable drummer Jeff Hamilton co-leads the Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra with John and his brother, alto saxophonist Jeff Clayton. He spoke of meeting John in 1972. “I was at Indiana University,” he recalls, “and he was a transfer student from L.A. Valley College. The first time we played together it was apparent that we were on the same musical page.”

Clayton had already benefited from Ray Brown’s tutelage and job referrals. “I had never played with anyone so close to Ray,” Hamilton points out. “John played these great, horn-like solos and his sound just empowered the band.”

The two talked about some day co-leading a big band in the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis mold. Hamilton went with the Woody Herman Orchestra and Clayton went with the Basie band. John was able to study charts by the Basie arrangers. “He had a lot of time on the bus,” Jeff states. “So John brought in his own piece to a rehearsal.” He grins as he relates: “It wasn’t met with much enthusiasm. But he went back and wrote another one. Basie heard it and said, ‘Let’s play that one more once.’ John knew he was in then.”

Bassist Katie Thiroux is one of the many young players whom Clayton has mentored over the years. They met at the Vail Jazz Workshop in 2005 when she was a high school student in Chatsworth. “I learned so much from him,” she maintains, “just by the way he interacted with people through music. I hadn’t met anybody like that up to that time.”

"John preaches what he teaches," Thiroux continues. "He can play a classical piece on the bass in every key and do the same thing with a jazz piece. He does anything he wants on the bass."

"John takes extra time with the best students," Hamilton reveals. "Just as Ray Brown passed on the important information that he gleaned from a lifetime in jazz to someone who was going to take that into the next era, John gives what he knows to the ones who get it."

In 2007, John spoke of the difficulties of leading a jazz orchestra in an era that could scarcely be more inhospitable to big band music. The smooth-functioning three-leader format speaks to the single-mindedness of the Claytons and Hamilton. The drummer acknowledges the uniqueness of the arrangement, albeit lightheartedly: "Three leaders just means there's another guy to help share the debt," he chuckles.

"When we started," John recalled, "Leonard Feather said we were making a mistake with three leaders. We've found that with each of us doing certain jobs, it takes the pressure off the other two. We help each other out and share problems and debts." Speaking of the two Jeffs, he said, "We care for and do things for each other in ways that only family would do.

"Teaching jobs, small band work and arranging, orchestrating and touring with Diana Krall help to keep the band afloat. "I'm a seeker of dreams," John offers. "My dream is to have enough support for the orchestra to be able to write anything I want to. But it's always been difficult, even in the big band era." A dream tenure as the resident band for the Hollywood Bowl's summer jazz series evaporated after several years of critical acclaim.

"You have to be crazy to do this," Clayton avers, "but you also have to be creative to survive. You can't play dances anymore but you can find out what colleges have a concert series. You can find out where the festivals are and what competitions might fund your music. Without a positive outlook, I can't imagine how our band would have stuck together for 30 years now." Long may they swing.



# California Jazz Foundation's Annual Gala

## Give the Band a Hand

*You're  
Invited!*

6:00 p.m., Saturday, April 2, 2016  
Cocktail hour, silent auction, live auction, dinner

**The L.A. Hotel Downtown**  
**333 South Figueroa Street, Los Angeles, CA**

*"Nica" Honoree - John Clayton*  
*Heritage Award - Ray Brown*

The "Nica" is awarded to those individuals who exemplify the legacy of the Baroness Pannonica de Koenigswarter, known as "Nica," an iconic figure who forged a unique bond with the jazz community at a transformative time in American popular culture.



John Clayton, Grammy-winning educator and mentor, master of the acoustic bass and ever-ready, largely unheralded philanthropist, will be presented with the "Nica" award. Countless young musicians have benefited from John's prodigious work as Artistic Director of the Vail Workshop, the Jazz Port Townsend Workshop, and the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival; and as an educator at USC and UCLA.

Ray Brown, educator and Grammy award-winning double-bassist who played a leading role in defining the modern jazz rhythm, will be posthumously recognized for his significant contributions to jazz. Cecelia Brown will accept the Heritage Award in his honor.



Master of Ceremonies: Steve Tyrell

### Music performance featuring

- ◇ Clayton-Hamilton Jazz Orchestra
- ◇ Gerald Clayton, Grace Kelly, Christoph Luty, Graham Dechter, Adam Bravo
- ◇ California Institute of the Arts Combo

### Honorary Dinner Chairs

- Terry Gibbs
- Jeff Hamilton
- Plas Johnson
- Lainie Kazan
- Michael Lazaroff
- Cathy & Howard Stone
- Billy Dee Williams

Tickets: \$200, held at the door  
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CJF is a nonprofit 501 (c)(3) membership organization created to aid and assist California jazz musicians in financial or medical crisis.

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