

Jacob Smith Jazzes Up Dinner At the Gables in Beach Haven

Friday nights at the Gables in Beach Haven just got a little jazzier, thanks to the addition of live saxophonist Jacob Smith of Egg Harbor Township, whose smooth, recognizable melodies don't just greet visitors but seemingly wrap them in a warm and welcoming musical embrace.

To any dining atmosphere live music adds, in Smith's opinion, "something you can't really put your finger on or put a price on. ... When you walk into a place, it just gives you a certain feeling." To the credit of the Gables' new owners, Loveladies homeowners Sondra and Steve Beninati, he added, restaurateurs savvy enough to hire musicians typically either are musicians themselves or simply understand the value of putting live entertainment on the menu. Others just don't get it.

As is, outside and in, the Gables (open Thursday through Sunday from now through the end of April, when the summertime daily schedule resumes) is a feast for the senses. In each of the three uniquely cozy dining rooms, the warm glow of candlelight plays off richly colored walls, eye-catching and ornately framed artwork and mirrors, plush furnishings and gilded fixtures; unimposing arrangements of fresh cut flowers and finery accent each table; and aromas of freshly prepared gourmet foods mingle with the soft sounds of conversational murmurings.

Smith's objective, he said, is to enhance the existing ambience without overpowering it or interfering, which is why it doesn't bother him one bit to set up and play — accompanied by background tracks piped through his laptop computer — in a corner of the front entryway, all but tucked behind the 1932 Steinway player piano that dominates the space. Dinner guests see Smith immediately upon entering but cannot necessarily watch him from their tables.

"My job is just to add to the atmosphere; I'm not the star," said the humble father of five and retired 20-year member of the U.S. Army Field Band.

He does, though, have a way of making a star-worthy impression, judging by the reactions of several guests who made a point of thanking and complimenting him on their way out. ("The more intimate the place, the more that happens," he said). He had had a similar effect on Sondra Beninati.

Smith, a fulltime professional musician, has

Sunspot



Jack Reynolds

IN THE MOOD: Jacob Smith uniquely tailors his set lists to suit a restaurant's atmosphere and a dinner crowd's reactions.

standing gigs on other nights of the week in Margate and Mays Landing, but he is a relative newcomer to the Southern Ocean County area who began playing at the Tuckerton Beach Grille this summer and decided to pursue other venues in the off-season. He paid a visit to the Gables one early fall day to introduce himself, and returned for a second visit to seal the deal with a live audition. No sooner did Beninati hear him play, she said, than she booked him as a regular Friday night attraction, and he started there in October.

Smith first learned to play the saxophone when he was in fifth grade and took private lessons from an accomplished graduate of the Berklee School of Music. It seems his future was foreshadowed, while on a high school band field trip, the first time he heard an Air Force band's rendition of "Play That Funky Music." He was so impressed, he later decided after talking to military recruiters to join the Army so he could audition for the Field Band. His music education

continued in the Army; he attended a tri-service school of music, where he studied and practiced in the company of Army, Navy and Marine Corps musicians.

It's funny, Smith mused, how a musician is drawn to a certain instrument or type of music from an early age and how things have a way of figuring themselves out. Had Smith not been born a procrastinator, he might have been a trumpet player. In fourth grade, when his elementary school first offered the chance to play an instrument, he wanted to play the trumpet but failed to get his permission slip signed and returned in time and, by the time fifth grade rolled around, he chose the sax instead.

Now, while he admits "there's nothing like playing with other musicians," he prefers to work in classier places as a solo act (his business cards announce him as OMB, for "one man band") rather than to play in bars with a band; the nights are earlier and the headaches fewer; he said with a laugh that suggested knowing from personal experience. Still, he enjoys taking part in the occasional friendly jam session.

For his professional gigs, Smith said he never consults a prepared set list. Though his strength is in the genre some would call "smooth jazz" — really just popular rhythm and blues of the '70s, he noted — his repertoire includes swing music of

the 1930s and '40s, contemporary soft rock and everything in between. Every night brings a different crowd, and he tailors his music selection accordingly, doing his best to gauge listeners' preferences by their ages and by the reactions he observes.

This past weekend, the mood was right for a little John Denver (what woman never wished "Annie's Song" had been written for her?), some Elton John, the Beatles, Carly Simon, The Mamas and the Papas, Toni Braxton and Christopher Cross.

When all the right elements combine — a premium cut of meat or fish from the à la carte menu, expertly seasoned and served with fresh vegetables and utterly lovable potatoes, well paired with a bottle of locally grown and produced wine; the right lighting and temperature; good company and conversation; great music — a Friday night at the Gables adds up to sure-fire sensual satisfaction.

—Victoria Ford

victoriaford@thesandpaper.net