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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

January 29, 2018

## **FirstWorks Heats up February with Big Band, Jazz Age Celebration of Indelible American Composer George Gershwin**

17-piece Gershwin Big Band invites local swing dancers onto The VETS stage  
Prohibition-style libations and vintage dancers delight at pre-show Speakeasy  
Who could ask for anything more?

**PROVIDENCE, RI – FirstWorks**, a Rhode Island non-profit dedicated to building community through world-class arts, celebrates the enduring musical legacy of composer George Gershwin with programs culminating in a performance of “**American Rhapsody: The Gershwin Songbook**” at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, February 22 at The VETS (1 Avenue of the Arts, Providence). The **FirstWorks Artistic Icons Series** concert program features the 17-piece Gershwin Big Band and highlights special guest performers from Rhode Island's rich community of creative talent. Tickets range from \$28-\$88 and are on sale now at [first-works.org](http://first-works.org) and 401-421-ARTS (2787), and at The VETS Box Office at 220 Weybosset Street, Providence.

The 17-piece Gershwin Big Band is led by the charismatic vocalist and bandleader Michael Andrew, hailed as “the next Harry Connick Jr.... a natural bandleader” by The New York Post. Together with vocalist Michelle Amato, they bring beloved Gershwin standards like “I Got Rhythm,” “Someone to Watch Over Me,” “The Man I Love” and many more to life in this inspirational new program produced and created by members of the Gershwin family.

“I have enjoyed countless Gershwin concerts throughout the world, and I can truly say that Michael Andrew is one of the most talented entertainers I have ever seen. His ability to interpret the music of George Gershwin is extraordinary,” said Todd Gershwin, George Gershwin's great-nephew and one of the show's developers.

The concert evening kicks off at 6:00 p.m. with a pre-show cocktail Speakeasy in The VETS Loft where premium ticketholders can relive the Roaring Twenties with a signature cocktail from Regency Plaza and live entertainment from Chifferobe, featuring New England's premiere vintage dance company, the TropiGals.

Doors to The VETS lobbies open to concert ticketholders at 6:30 p.m. for **FirstWorks JumpStart** entertainment. Featured JumpStarts include the **Rhode Island Philharmonic Music School Jazz Sextet** led by Ron Sanfilippo and a dance performance by **Providence Swings**. The JumpStart series highlights local performers in FirstWorks event venue lobbies as a way of connecting Rhode Island's rising talent with world-renowned Artistic Icons.

Dancers from Providence Swings will also make a special guest appearance on the concert mainstage during the Gershwin Big Band's performance of “Blues” from the Broadway hit musical “An American in Paris.”

“There is something magical about the many faces of George Gershwin's music, and its ability to bring audiences of different generations and backgrounds together almost a century on,” said Kathleen Pletcher, Executive Artistic Director of FirstWorks. “We're thrilled to include the next

generation of performers in our celebration of a true Artistic Icon through our JumpStarts and Arts Learning matinee.”

**FirstWorks** offers audiences of all ages ways to get into the swing of Gershwin's legacy. As part of FirstWorks Arts Learning program, over 1,400 K-12 students from Rhode Island schools have the opportunity to attend a student matinee of “**American Rhapsody: The Gershwin Songbook**” from 10:30-11:30 a.m. at The VETS. Student matinee tickets are \$8.50 and are available by calling FirstWorks Education and Community Outreach Manager Kathleen McAreavey at 401-868-1149 or email [kathleenm@first-works.org](mailto:kathleenm@first-works.org). Participating schools will receive an accompanying FirstWorks Arts Learning curriculum guide.

On February 6, FirstWorks in partnership with the John Nicholas Brown Center for Humanities (JNBC) and Richard Snyder invite journalist and jazz critic Larry Blumenfeld, composer/musician/polymath Melvin Gibbs and saxophonist, composer and arranger Russ Gershon, founder of jazz ensemble Either/Orchestra to Brown University for a lunchtime Creative Conversation titled **Reimagining Gershwin: Rhapsody in Black and Blue**. Open by reservation only to **FirstWorks Curator's Circle** members and the Brown University JNBC community, the conversation will explore the relationship between George Gershwin's music—including his controversial 1935 opera “Porgy and Bess” and his iconic 1924 composition “Rhapsody in Blue”—and African American music and culture. The panelists will also explore Gershwin's formative influences, as well as the enduring influence of his work.

### **About FirstWorks**

**FirstWorks** is a non-profit based in Providence, Rhode Island whose purpose is to build the cultural, educational and economic vitality of its community by engaging audiences with world-class performing arts and education programs. Since 2004, **FirstWorks** festivals, performances

and programs have attracted more than 400,000 participants. The **FirstWorks Arts Learning Program** reaches more than 4,000 students from public and charter schools across Rhode Island with transformative arts-based learning experiences. **FirstWorks** is Founding Partner for PVDfest, partnering with the City of Providence to produce an international arts celebration held each June that draws tens of thousands of visitors to Providence to experience music, art and spectacular performances. Visit [first-works.org](http://first-works.org) to learn more.

### **About George Gershwin**

George Gershwin was born in Brooklyn in 1898, the second of four children from a close-knit immigrant family. He began his musical career as a song-plugger on Tin Pan Alley, but was soon writing his own pieces. Gershwin's first published song, "When You Want 'Em, You Can't Get 'Em," demonstrated innovative new techniques, but only earned him five dollars. Soon after, however, he met a young lyricist named Irving Ceaser. Together they composed a number of songs including "Swanee," which sold more than a million copies.

In 1924, George collaborated with his brother, lyricist Ira Gershwin, on a musical comedy "Lady Be Good." It included such standards as "Fascinating Rhythm" and "The Man I Love." It was the beginning of a partnership that would continue for the rest of the composer's life. Together, they wrote many more successful musicals including "Oh Kay!" and "Funny Face," starring Fred Astaire and his sister Adele. While continuing to compose popular music for the stage, Gershwin began to lead a double life, trying to make his mark as a serious composer.

When he was 25 years old, his jazz-influenced "Rhapsody in Blue" premiered in New York's Aeolian Hall at the concert, "An Experiment in Music." The audience included Jascha Heifetz, Fritz Kreisler, Leopold Stokowski, Serge Rachmaninov, and Igor Stravinsky. Gershwin followed this success with his orchestral work "Piano Concerto in F, Rhapsody No. 2" and "An American in Paris."

In the early 1930's, Gershwin experimented with some new ideas in Broadway musicals. "Strike Up The Band," "Let 'Em Eat Cake," and "Of Thee I Sing" were innovative works dealing with social issues of the time. "Of Thee I Sing" was a major hit, and the first comedy ever to win the Pulitzer Prize. In 1935, he presented a folk opera "Porgy and Bess" in Boston with only moderate success. Now recognized as one of the seminal works of American opera, it included such memorable songs as "It Ain't Necessarily So," "I Loves You, Porgy," and "Summertime."

In 1937, after many successes on Broadway, the brothers decided to go to Hollywood. Again they teamed up with Fred Astaire, who was now paired with Ginger Rogers. They made the musical film, "Shall We Dance," which included such hits as "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" and "They Can't Take That Away From Me." Soon after came "A Damsel in Distress," in which Astaire appeared with Joan Fontaine. After becoming ill while working on a film, he had plans to return to New York to work on a string quartet, a ballet and another opera, but these pieces were never written. At the age of 38, he died of a brain tumor. Today he remains one of America's most beloved popular musicians.

### **About American Rhapsody: The Gershwin Songbook**

Nearly a century after the songs were composed, George Gershwin's music remains as fresh and irresistible as it did during the Jazz Age. His poetic melodies and eclectic oeuvre of everything including Broadway, Hollywood, opera and classic American standards have left a legacy that audiences love to hear again and again.

The Gershwin Big Band is comprised of world class jazz musicians with an incredible dynamic range and proclivity for swing and improvisation. The traditional big band configuration is ideal for presenting the works of the Gershwins, who influenced American music at a time when big band was becoming the definitive sound of pop.

### **About Providence Swings**

Becky Zub and Vivian Madrid have been dancing and teaching at **Providence Swings** since 2004. They teach in two locations year-round (AS220 in Providence, and Studio One RI in Lincoln) and specialize in Lindy Hop, solo jazz, and dances from the jazz era. Each Thursday night you'll find them at the local swing dance called the "Bread and Butter Jam" where they express their creativity on the dance floor. Their love of dance knows no bounds and together they have created a Rhode Island chorus group called Divine Providence. More info [www.providenceswings.com](http://www.providenceswings.com)

### **About Rhode Island Philharmonic Music School Jazz Sextet**

Led by instructor Ron Sanfillipo, the sextet is comprised of music students Ben Allendorf (trumpet) from North Smithfield, RI; Stephen Landry (trombone) from Saunderstown, RI; Ian Banno (bass) from Warwick, RI; Eliot Laidlaw (alto sax), Parker Reid (drums) and Alden Sadovnikoff (piano) all from Barrington, RI. Ron Sanfillipo is a jazz educator who has taught in the jazz department at Brown University and the Rhode Island Philharmonic Music School for over 14 years, and at the University of Rhode Island where he teaches jazz piano and directs jazz ensembles. The Rhode Island Philharmonic Music School encourages lifelong engagement with music through comprehensive music education and community partnership programs taught by Orchestra members and other outstanding faculty at The Carter Center in East Providence, RI. More info [musicschool.riphil.org](http://musicschool.riphil.org)

### **Listings Information:**

**WHO: FirstWorks Artistic Icons Series presents American Rhapsody: The Gershwin Songbook**

**WHAT:** A glorious evening of iconic jazz age music by George Gershwin, brought to life by the 17-piece Gershwin Big Band.

**WHEN: Thursday, February 22, 2018 at 7:30 p.m.**

**WHERE: FirstWorks at The Vets** (1 Avenue of the Arts, Providence)

**TICKETS: \$28-\$88** (includes a \$3 restoration fee). Premium ticket includes admission to pre-show cocktail Speakeasy at 6:00 p.m.

PURCHASE: Tickets are available at <http://first-works.org> and at the Vets Box Office: **401-421-ARTS (2787)**, 220 Weybosset Street, Providence

WHO: **FirstWorks Arts Learning Matinee: American Rhapsody: The Gershwin Songbook**

WHAT: A special daytime performance of iconic jazz age music by George Gershwin, brought to life by the 17-piece Gershwin Big Band.

WHEN: **Thursday, February 22, 2018 from 10:30-11:30 a.m.**

WHERE: **FirstWorks at The Vets** (1 Avenue of the Arts, Providence)

TICKETS: **\$8.50 student tickets**. Teacher chaperones receive free admission with every 20 student tickets. Contact Kathleen McAreavey at 401-868-1149 / [kathleenm@first-works.org](mailto:kathleenm@first-works.org).

WHO: **Jazz critic Larry Blumenfeld, composer/musician Melvin Gibbs and composer/musician Russ Gershon**

WHAT: Reimagining Gershwin: Rhapsody in Black and Blue - a lunchtime Creative Conversation exploring the legacy of "Porgy and Bess"

WHEN: **Tuesday, February 6, 2018 from 12:00-1:00 p.m.**

WHERE: **John Nicholas Brown Center for the Humanities** (Nightingale Brown House, 357 Benefit Street, Providence)

TICKETS: Space is limited! By reservation only to FirstWorks Curator's Circle members and the Brown University JNBC student community. Contact Holly Taylor at 401-421-4278.

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