

What is MOJO's Jazzalea Award? First, let's tackle the pronunciation. It is a portmanteau of "jazz" and "azalea," the blooming bushes that gave Mobile its Azalea City nickname. So just a J at the beginning of azalea.

It started in 2015 when Gulf Coast Ethnic and Heritage Jazz Festival founder Creola Ruffin wanted to present a plaque of thanks to a couple of media figures who had greatly helped the festival for many years. In consideration, she wondered if MOJO wanted to chip in since those same figures had been just as valuable to both organizations. Ruffin brought the idea to the MOJO board of directors.

By the time the MOJO board meeting was finished, the idea had been reshaped. It would no longer be a joint effort but a MOJO project and the recipient being thanked was trimmed down to one person: al.com Entertainment Reporter Lawrence Specker.

After coming up with an award name and a logo, its general purpose was established. MOJO aimed to call attention to the organizers and background figures who make it possible for locals to enjoy live jazz.

So, in April 2016, Lawrence Specker selected the guitar trio Vibration Configuration as the featured performers then listened as a line of dignitaries lauded praise on his efforts. He was presented with a physical award designed by Carmen Brown.

In April 2017, Bob Spielmann was awarded in conjunction with his quarter-century at the helm of Mobile Jazz Festival and his work on MOJO's board of directors. The Mobile Big Band Society performed.

In April 2018, Mobile Jazz Festival founder J.C. MacAleer was feted. Saxophonist Theodore Arthur led a combo.

In April 2019, Excelsior Band Leader, Jazz Studio leader and MOJO board member Hosea London received the Jazzalea Award. His youthful charges at the Jazz Studio performed. MOJO also presented a special award to Bill Frazier for his decades of invaluable work supplying MOJO with a venue, an effort that singlehandedly allowed the organization to thrive since 2001.

The next award was presented in September 2021 after the COVID-19 pandemic delayed it for over a year. In the interim, the award had picked up the name of Bob Spielmann, who passed away in early 2020. Creola Ruffin was the Jazzalea Award recipient and the E.B. Coleman Jazz Orchestra performed.

In May 2022, Catt Sirten was the Jazzalea Award recipient. The Suburban Jazz Quintet performed.

In September 2023, former politico, jazz performer and charter MOJO board member Joseph Mitchell was presented a Jazzalea Award. A Louisiana combo assembled by Harry Anderson performed.

Joe Occhipinti has been selected as the latest Jazzalea Award recipient. Occhipinti was a founder of the Jazz Society of Pensacola and served as their musical director at one point, but he jumped into MOJO activities, serving on the board of directors for over 10 years in addition to the numerous performances he has logged in the Mobile. Now on the verge of 90 years old, he still makes the monthly drives to Mobile to support MOJO with his involvement.

Joe will be presented his Jazzalea Award on Sept. 22, 6:30 p.m. at Carmen's Club (Cedar Street Social Club). He will lead his own big band for the occasion.