

Drivetime borrows star power from Justin Guarini

By **NAILA FRANCIS**
STAFF WRITER

Bernie Capodici is aiming to redefine the genre.

With the failed relaunching of Philadelphia smooth-jazz station WJJZ last year, the Doylestown percussionist and composer is positioning his band Drivetime to lead the movement — with a little help from “American Idol” alum Justin Guarini.

Guarini will perform with the band on Thursday when it showcases its new CD, “Reflections,” during Michael Tozzi’s weekly Groove Series at Warmdaddy’s in Philadelphia.

The 2002 “AI” runner-up, soon to be Capodici’s son-in-law — Guarini marries his daughter, Reina, next spring — also



“(They’re) great musicians that know how to throw a party with a killer selection of tunes that range from jazz to soul to rock and smooth jazz,” says Justin Guarini, here with Bernie Capodici.

performed one of the cuts on the album, putting his earnest, soulful take on the Bobby Caldwell classic “What You Won’t Do for Love.” He will perform that tune on Thursday

in addition to classics like “My Funny Valentine,” “What’s Goin’ On” and “Let’s Stay Together.”

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Having sat in with Drivetime before during the band’s regular gigs at Stephanie’s Restaurant and Lounge in Doylestown, the Central Bucks East High School graduate jumped at the chance to be a guest artist on the new CD. He brought with him his own experience with the genre, beginning with his introduction to traditional jazz while a student at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and including the 2005 release of his album of reinvented jazz

standards, “Stranger Things Have Happened.” Guarini also appeared in 2007 as a featured vocalist on the jazz-fusion album “Foreign Shores” by David Hughes, the bassist for David Benoit and the Jazz Crusaders.

“The medium offers me the opportunity to completely step outside the perception most people have of me,” he says. “Drivetime is a great jazz/smooth jazz band, and I love their sound and energy.”

Capodici has been itching to put a fresh spin on the Caldwell tune for years.

“I added a screaming sax solo with Justin scatting overtop,” he says. “I wanted something that people knew, but

they’d also be, like, ‘Whoa, listen to *that* take.’ Justin just kills it.”

The sound exemplifies the type of jazz Drivetime has been delivering for the last several years. Even though Capodici started the band in 1999 with the goal of developing the “quintessential smooth jazz cover band” — an anomaly in its time, he says — today, he prefers the mantle of “urban organic jazz.”

“It’s not really smooth jazz. It’s not really jazz jazz,” he says, noting that the album’s songs — which include renditions of Herbie Hancock’s “Cantaloupe Island,” Average White Band’s “Pick up the Pieces” and Sade’s “Smooth

Operator” — were all done in one take by his jazz sextet, featuring Richard Orr on saxophone, Jimmy Dell’Orefice on keyboards, John Sorrenti on guitar, Chris Friedrich on bass and Mike Piper on drums.

“With so many smooth jazz stations falling by the wayside, I can hear in other people’s music a need to become a little more acoustic and a little more organic. That whole idea of spending so much money on a highly produced, perfect CD is changing.”

Drivetime appears Thursday at Warmdaddy’s, 1400 S. Columbus Blvd., Philadelphia. Show time is 6 to 8 p.m. Admission is free. Information: 215-462-2000.