

## Jazz After Hours

by Kirk Silsbee

Jazz musicians are particular about where they play. Clubs, as trumpeter Art Farmer once admonished, are where musicians conduct research and development; concerts and festivals are where they bring out their tried and true ideas and musical devices. But there are other places where musicians create, which few lay listeners have access to. When the last set is over, when the chairs have been put on the tables and doors to the club are locked, musicians head for the places where jazz is *really* played. It's the set after the last set.

Jam sessions used to be laboratories and proving grounds for jazz musicians. Lessons were imparted that can't be taught in classrooms--what drummer Shelly Manne called "street playing." Musicians learned new forms and techniques and tested their mettle against the competition in these milieus. Jam sessions infused the music with ideas that were later perfected and surfaced onstage or in the recording studio. Sadly, the jam session culture, once an important adjunct to the jazz world, is all but lost now.

A small trend has quietly taken hold. Jazz musicians play in intimate, relaxed gatherings to an attentive audience. Private homes are the typical settings where, on a weekend afternoon, a couple of informal sets are played. Food and drink are provided and the players mingle with their audiences. For jazz *cognoscenti*, it's a special opportunity to hear one-of-a-kind performances. For musicians, it's a chance to play whatever they want to appreciative and knowledgeable ears.

Salons are nothing new. Classical musicians were presented, playing and speaking about their music, in drawing rooms and private homes since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century at least. European royalty sponsored these gatherings, which were overseen by a wealthy doyenne. The *marchesa* or the *contessa* directed the evening's activities, often down to the flow of conversation and the precise moment when champagne was served. A moneyed patron might

even commission a new piece to be premiered at the salon. These were grand functions, dividends of a grand age.

The Victorian Era and, later, World War I wiped out these bastions of orchestrated civility, and salons of a different nature surfaced. Gertrude Stein's notable gatherings in the French home she shared with her lover, Alice B. Toklas, brought writers like Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and Andre Gide together in a bohemian atmosphere. The informality has been a component of virtually all salons to follow.

Contemporary jazz salons in Southern California have their antecedents in the rent parties and after-hours clubs that were clustered around Central Avenue, the main artery of black life in Los Angeles. After their jobs at downtown theaters like the Lincoln or the Paramount were over for the night, black musicians would head to a rent party, where food and drink were plentiful and they were treated as honored guests. Athletes, entertainers, businessmen, Pullman porters, pimps and their women all rubbed shoulders at these conflagrations.

A good pianist, one who could entertain and keep things moving, was particularly valuable to these soirees. Often, a lone pianist was the only source of music for a whole room of dancers. Horn players, sometimes from the visiting orchestras, like those of Duke Ellington, Count Basie or Jimmie Lunceford, might play for hours just for the chance to exchange with local musicians and all they could eat and drink. Pullman porters, those black knights of the railways, were a good source for the latest records. They picked them up in all the big cities across the country and pollinated other towns with them, acting as advance men for the music.

The Central Avenue district had more than its share of after-hours spots, often managed by sporting men who operated on both sides of the law. Stuff Crouch, 'Black Dot' McGhee and Johnny Cornish were among the most notable. These were "bottle clubs," where patrons brought their own and were sold setups, or were provided with illicit liquor for a price. The teenaged Bobby Short,

on the road and forging his own identity as a cabaret singer, recalled Cornish's Double Vee club--and others like it--in his memoir, *The Life and Times of a Saloon Singer* (Panache Press, '95): "I met Charlie Parker at Cornish's place. ...some of them were put together quite stylishly, one done by a top Beverly Hills decorator, another owned by a bartender from the Dunbar Hotel. And the crowds who gathered in those places were a mixed bag, a motley group of Angelenos, jazz musicians, and actors. The Rich and the not so well-to-do, black and white—all with a mutual passion. Love of what was poured in their glasses, the booze that was served until all hours of the morning."

Stuff Crouch—unofficial mayor of Central Avenue--ran the Backstage, on Vernon, near Central. It was a training ground for teenage drummer Forestorn Hamilton. Speaking from his home in New York, Chico Hamilton elaborates: "Johnny Cornish...I remember him and 'Black Dot.' See, I used to sub for Lee Young at the Club Alabam when I was 16 with Lorenzo Flennoy's band so I knew those guys well. The Backstage was upstairs, across the street from Ivie's Chicken Shack. I used to play in there all night long, sometimes until 5 or 7 the next morning. Come to school that day and the teacher hated me 'cause I smelled like cigarettes. But that's how I learned how to play."

At the Ritz, also at Vernon and Central, young alto saxophonist Art Pepper stepped down from the sidewalk into the dark room (made mysterious by the heavy theater curtains at the door) and studied the saxophone royalty of Coleman Hawkins, Johnny Hodges, Ben Webster and Lester Young. Pres taught the fledgling jazz pianist Joe Albany the bridge to "Sweet Lorraine" at the Ritz. Young Dexter Gordon kept sharp at the Ritz in the company of Webster, Young and piano virtuoso Art Tatum.

Jack Sims would leave his home in Hawthorne and head for Honey Murphy's, at 93<sup>rd</sup> and Central, in 1940 and '41. At 14, he found that his saxophone case was a kind of passport and that Honey's was a classroom where school was in session all night. Many years later, the man they called Zoot told Ira Gitler (in *Swing*

*to Bop*, Oxford University Press, '85): "...to this day, any time I hear an out-of-tune upright...(and an) electric guitar playin' the blues, it does something to me."

Brother's, on Adams near Vermont was a dimly-lit den of iniquity that attracted Hollywood people who wanted to let their hair down at night. Duke Ellington heard Tatum there one night in the early 1940s. The *paterfamilias* of jazz piano was having his way with the piano when a visitor wondered aloud whether or not he knew any Bach. For the next hour, Tatum played nothing but Bach. Ellington and all those present were sufficiently awed.

After his job at the Streets of Paris on Hollywood Boulevard was finished, Tatum could be heard upstairs at Lovejoys, on Central south of Vernon. He made the wounded house piano sound like a freshly-tuned concert grand, to the astonishment of the other pianists who had wrestled with it. Tatum would play until dawn, just as long as the whiskey shots and Pabst Blue Ribbon kept coming.

After his eight-week job with Dizzy Gillespie at Billy Berg's ended, the most consistent showplace for alto saxophonist Charlie Parker in the spring of 1946 was the Finale Club on First and San Pedro streets. It was one of several clubs briefly established in Little Tokyo during the absence of interned Japanese-Americans. Trumpeter Howard McGhee built a band around Parker that included saxophonists Teddy Edwards, Sonny Criss and J.D. King. The music started at one in the morning and it attracted every jazz-minded musician and listener in Southern California for a couple of months. One night, a couple requested "The Gypsy," a hit parade song by the Ink Spots. The band of too-hip beboppers snickered at the thought of playing such a corny tune. Then Parker stood up and moved to the microphone. He called out the chords to pianist Earl Ecklin and on that night, Bird introduced "The Gypsy" to the jazz repertory.

At Jack's Basket Room on the Avenue, the fried chicken was served in wicker baskets with shoestring potatoes. Dexter Gordon and Wardell Gray carried on a nightly battle of the tenor

saxophones there, slugging it out well into the wee hours. Dial Records owner Ross Russell heard them one night and had them in the studio within the week, recording “The Chase,” the immortal two-tenor face-off in June of 1947.

Andy and Mary MacKay were a white, jazz-loving couple who lived in a stucco tract home on Denker Avenue in Southwest L.A. They frequented Central Avenue clubs in the 1940s and played host to Tatum, Benny Carter, Earl ‘Fatha’ Hines, Count Basie, Nellie Lutcher, Erroll Garner, Ben Webster, and Big Joe Turner, among others. Andy was a movie buff and took silent home movies of Tatum, the King Cole Trio, Slim Gaillard and others, including the only known film record of Ellington’s Mayan Theatre musical *Jump For Joy*. The MacKays have passed and their films have yet to surface.

Eduardo Tirella was a high-profile set and interior designer. In the late ‘50s he held parties at his house on Stanley Hills Place in Laurel Canyon. He loved people in the arts and those who assembled at Tirella’s soirees and sampled his vegetarian feasts included Dennis Hopper, Peggy Lee, Leroy Vinnegar, William Claxton, Paul Horn, Larry Bunker, James Coburn, Red Mitchell, and Lenny Bruce. Singer-pianist Bob Dorough met songwriter Tommy Wolfe at Tirella’s. Before her passing last fall, jazz singer Terry Morel recalled a quiet moment. “One time I was at Ed’s,” she reflected, “and Johnny Mandel was playing the piano. It was so gorgeous I could hardly stand it. He played “The Shadow of Your Smile” and something that I’d never heard before. He said, ‘Oh, it’s just something I’m toying with. I call it “Emily”...’”

One of the most fabled jazz salons anywhere flourished through the largesse of tobacco heiress Doris Duke. Her conduit into the world of jazz was pianist Joe Castro. They kept company as early as 1953; a news wire photo shows them at a table in New York’s Birdland that year, serenaded by bar-walking tenor saxophonist Big Jay McNeely. The liaison ended in ‘64 when Castro sued Duke over a knife wound to his hand (which he later withdrew). In between, Castro invited some of the most celebrated

local and visiting musicians to Falcon Lair, the 13-room Spanish-style mansion that Duke owned on Bella Drive in Benedict Canyon. Bassist Oscar Pettiford wrote and recorded “The Pendulum at Falcon Lair” in 1956 in honor of the place. The Metrojazz label released two titles recorded at the mansion by tenor saxophonist Teddy Edwards in 1959.

The home was built by silent screen heart-throb Rudolph Valentino in 1924 and named for an aborted movie project (*The Hooded Falcon*). Duke bought it from Gloria Swanson in 1953. She added a well-appointed music room for Castro over the three-car garage, dubbed ‘The Playroom.’ Informal musicales took place here and in the main house, amid the crystal chandeliers and armored statues. The sessions were legendary among musicians and the favored lay people who were included. One night Chet Baker and June Christy sang duets, while her husband, tenor saxophonist Bob Cooper, played *obbligati* behind them. Baker held the room spellbound as he sang “Every Time We Say Goodbye.” Art Farmer, from one of the overstuffed chairs, broke the silence by announcing, “Chet, you ought to sing on your next album...”

Castro had the foresight to tape many of the Falcon Lair jams. A couple of years ago, Pablo released an album of one set by Zoot Sims—playing alto instead of his customary tenor saxophone—with Castro’s trio from ’56. Purportedly, there are tapes of saxophone conclaves with Sims, Stan Getz and Gerry Mulligan; vocal/tenor numbers with Anita O’Day and Dexter Gordon; tenor sax duets with Lucky Thompson and Teddy Edwards; duets with Sims and pianist Teddy Wilson; bop tenor saxophonist Allen Eager with Paul Chambers and Philly Joe Jones of the Miles Davis rhythm section. The mind reels at the combinations and hopes for subsequent releases. Many a discographical hole might be filled by these entries.

The current private showcases for jazz in Southern California provide an alternative to clubs and concert halls for a relative few, usually on a membership basis. They are announced by cyber

mailing lists and telephone. Immigration attorney Ralph Ehrenpreiss hosted his salon up to last year with his wife Jessica. They presented the likes of alto saxophonist Lee Konitz, singer Jon Hendricks, pianists Martial Solal, Mulgrew Miller and Uri Caine in their Bel Air home. “I tried to do something different,” Ralph stresses. “I brought in people who don’t live here and let the artists speak about what they do. In the case of a great raconteur like Jon, the conversation was just as lively as the music.” Ehrenpreiss will resume a salon in August in conjunction with UCLA’s Friends of Jazz committee in the school’s faculty lounge.

Encino resident Mimi Melnick concedes that a music salon is something she’s wanted to do most of her life. As a teenager, she heard a recital of East Indian music in a private home and she never forgot it. For the last ten years, she has hosted new music and avant garde jazz, under the banner “Jazz Salon.” “When I bought my present home,” says the petite Melnick, “I got a Steinway grand piano and I was ready to go. Horace Tapscott played my first concert.” Melnick has hosted the cream of new music players in Southern California—alto saxophonist Arthur Blythe, clarinetist John Carter, cornetist Bobby Bradford, bassist Roberto Miranda and many others, often in surprising combinations.

Her house accommodates 60-70 people and musicians receive all the proceeds. “My piano tuner stored a nine-foot Mason-Hamlin piano at my house for a couple of years,” says Melnick. “I started doing two-piano salons, with Horace and Nate Morgan, then with Gerald Clayton and Tamir Hendelman. Gerald and Tamir now tour as a two-piano package and it’s gratifying to know I launched them on this.”

Nothing in Betty Hoover’s Texas background prepared her for the role of salon hostess. “Jazz at the A Frame,” named for the shape of her Los Angeles house, is in its fifth year. “When I was growing up,” she chuckles, “I didn’t hear any jazz; it was Bob Wills’ Texas Playboys. I learned about jazz when I came here in

‘81. I got the idea for this from Mimi’s events. She was a pattern for me.”

“Musicians say they like to play at my place because they don’t need microphones; the acoustics are pretty good. The people really listen, and the musicians get paid better than when they work in clubs. I can seat about 115 people in my house and I can cram 15 or so into the loft. When Ernie Andrews sang, it was packed and he was just amazing!”

At least once a month for the last year, on a quiet street in Beverly Hills, George Klabin holds his Sunday gatherings. His private, non-profit foundation, “Rising Jazz Stars,” has hosted out-of-towners like pianists Eliane Elias, Steve Kuhn, Enrico Pieranunzi, and Dave Kikoski, vocalists Angela Hagenbach and Kathy Kosins, and guitarist Romero Lubambo. “I want to help lesser-known but highly-deserving mainstream artists,” says Klabin, who has a background in jazz broadcasting and the recording industry.

He’s built a state-of-the-art performing space into his house. In front of a large room that seats 80, bands play in an enclosed area outfitted with video cameras and microphones. The performances are recorded and the tapes become the property of the artists, to use to help their careers. The room is an intimate recital hall, with a large video monitor that brings the musicians closer still to the audience. “My setting is a very attractive, living room-like atmosphere,” Klabin notes. “It’s specially-designed for acoustics and we now have an outdoor patio that we can use in the summer. So we can accommodate a few more people.”

The present-day jazz salons might not appear to have much in common with the raucous rent parties and after-hours joints of, say, 70 years ago. In both cases, though, jazz musicians are treated like royalty and that usually results in legendary performances.

The Committee for Jazz can be contacted at (310) 206-3269.

Jazz at the A Frame can be contacted at [www.Aframejazz.com](http://www.Aframejazz.com)



George Klabin can be contacted at 866-JAZZ HIT, or at [www.risingjazzstars.com](http://www.risingjazzstars.com)

Mimi Melnick's Jazz Salon has more members than she can accommodate; she discourages any new inquiries.