

Jazz and Boston: A True Combo

A look at the live-music scene, from traditional trios to experimental student performers

by JACOB SWEET



Clockwise from upper left: Sheila Jordan performs with the Yoko Miwa Trio at The Mad Monkfish, in Cambridge; a low-key evening at Wally's, in Boston; Alita Moses and Steven Feifke at the Shalin Liu Performance Center, in Rockport; Ravi Coltrane has also made his way to Rockport.

IT'S A FRIDAY NIGHT at The Mad Monkfish in Cambridge's Central Square and Yoko Miwa and her trio are performing their weekly set. The lights are dim and the Asian-fusion dishes are plated with style. For many, it's date night, and although it costs \$10 to sit in the Jazz Baroness Room—where the live performances take place—not everyone is completely tuned in. For some, music is part of the atmosphere, akin to the lipstick-red laminated seats; for others, it's *the* reason they came. Miwa, a Berklee associate professor of piano whose trio is a staple in Boston, plays with unpretentious grace and fluidity. The sound reaches the back of the room, but the closer you get to the ankle-high stage, the more the nuances stand out. Her breezy, articulate phrases

ers to turn away from their food and watch. Jazz is in the air.

The plate-glass storefront window behind the stage gives passersby a view of the trio, as external loudspeakers send Miwa's

roll into one another like waves pulsing along the shore, inspiring some din-

er rhythms into the street. Some people stand and listen; others have somewhere else to be. A not-insignificant number are musicians, who—juggling guitars, keyboards, saxophones, sound equipment, and even an upright bass or two—are off to their own gigs.

On any given weekend in Boston, there's plenty of jazz to be heard. This might surprise those who think jazz hubs mean New Orleans and New York City. "Boston doesn't have the reputation of being a great jazz

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: STU ROSNER; AGADIA MEZZOFANTI; ERIN SMITHERS; JANICE TSAI



Drummer Lenny White leads his band at the intimate Regattabar; percussionist Manolo Badrena performs at the same venue.

ies made contributions as well, but Boston was unique in that it made major contributions to all of them."

Proximity to New York City was a blessing and a curse. Positively, many of the world's best artists frequently visited: Dizzy Gillespie, Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington, Thelonious Monk. Negatively, they often went home with some of

COURTESY OF THE REGATTABAR (2)

city," says Pauline Bilsky, president of the advocacy group JazzBoston. "It's really not recognized—even here." But those on the lookout know that Boston certainly has a part to play.

The local jazz scene began in the early twentieth century and took off in the late 1940s, as American soldiers returned from war. With support from the GI Bill, servicemen flocked to Boston's three major music

schools: the New England Conservatory of Music (NEC), Schillinger House (now Berklee College of Music), and The Boston Conservatory (now Boston Conservatory at Berklee). As Richard Vacca details in *The Boston Jazz Chronicles*, Boston was not just a hotbed of musical talent, but also "a training ground for jazz journalists, a magnet for music education, and a proving ground for new approaches in jazz presentation. Other cit-

Boston's most promising young musicians in tow. Other cities may have had a bigger pool, but Boston musicians could outschool anyone. "We sort of looked down on the musical knowledge of the New York musicians because they were all there before they were ready," said prominent avant-garde jazz artist and Boston Conservatory graduate Sam Rivers, according to Vacca. "They got on-the-job training. We waited and got ourselves to-

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gether first and then we went to New York.”

Many of Boston's most storied jazz institutions have faded away, but others have popped up. And although very few clubs and restaurants feature jazz exclusively, JazzBoston tallied 150 venues in the Greater Boston area (extending to Worcester and the North Shore) that book jazz acts with some regularity. Bilsky points in particular to the Shalin Liu Performance Center in Rockport, and Chianti Restaurant & Lounge in Beverly. Framed by floor-to-ceiling glass windows and a stunning view

of the ocean, the Shalin Liu stage provides a pristine visual, as well as auditory, experience, and features widely recognized artists who might also perform at Lincoln Center or Symphony Hall. Branford Marsalis visited this September, and Grammy Award-winners Ulysses Owens Jr. and Jack DeJohnette are on this season's docket. Chianti is a homier venue, with entertainment six nights a week, and solid Italian food. Guest artists tend to be of more regional than national acclaim, but there is plenty of talent—and no cover charge. Also of note is The Saha-

Mike Rivard, strumming a North African sintir, leads Club D'Elf at the rose-tinted Lizard Lounge; Rachael Price sings with the Boston-based group Lake Street Dive.

ra Club, set in a nondescript brown building on a suburban Methuen street: it offers Tuesday-night jazz series, featuring an array of crowd-pleasing, mostly local musicians, food and bar service, and cabaret seating.

Moving into Boston's South End, one classic club does remain: Wally's Café, which has been plugging away for more than 75 years. Even today, its audience skews young.

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On a Saturday night, an unbridled improvisatory energy hits you just as you enter through the club's distinctive red door. About the width of two bowling lanes, the venue lacks much room to stretch out, but the restrictions do nothing to curb the pas-

sion of the crowd or the performers. Solos are rewarded with instant applause, and riffs are extemporized emphatically, with minimal breaks in the action. You can get close enough to observe the tenor sax player's minor annoyance when a reed doesn't respond

properly, and watch as the bassist takes control during the bandleader's bathroom break. Some 80 people can pack inside this airtight jazz haven, seven nights a week. Stepping back onto the street, you wonder how such a little room could contain so much verve.

Jazz Photographer Frank Stewart, at Harvard

Capturing the energy and spirit of jazz through still-image photography is a little like trying to bottle a tornado. Yet Frank Stewart has managed to do it by taking thousands of images across more than four decades, focusing on musicians in candid moments on- and off-stage. "What characterizes his photography, especially, is how intimate it is, and the access he gets to performers," notes Gabriella Jones-Monserrate, program director at Harvard's Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art, which features *The Sound of My Soul: Frank Stewart's Life in Jazz through December 13*.

The 74 images—mostly black and white prints, plus a selection of moody color shots—span the early 1970s through this year. Some of the earliest photographs came from traveling with pianist, composer, and bandleader Ahmad Jamal, not long after Stewart graduated from Cooper Union, where he studied with influential artists like Roy DeCarava and Garry Winogrand. Also reflected is Stewart's work as the lead photographer for Jazz at Lincoln Center ever since its inception in the early 1990s; he captures that orchestra, along with Wynton Marsalis, D.Mus. '09, and his musicians (with

whom he traveled between 1989 and 1992). There are numerous unposed portraits of revered jazz heroes: Dizzy Gillespie, Sonny Rollins, Walter Davis Jr., Art Blakey, Max Roach, Joe Temperley. Stewart's "Miles in the Green Room" (1981) features the great trumpeter and composer leaning against a wall looking fierce, surrounded by an entourage and photographers, with a towel draped around his neck like a prize-fighter, or, as Stewart's own caption put it, the "Christ-like figure in Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center."

Contemporary and rising jazz stars also shine. "Etienne" (2017) features the versatile trumpeter/band leader Etienne Charles, who has reignited excitement over jazz's Afro-Caribbean roots; he's caught onstage in mid-percussive heat. The young multi-instrumentalist and singer Camille Thurman, whose album *Waiting for the Sunrise* won this year's best "jazz with vocals" Independent Music Award, is shown barefoot and grinning while warming up in "Before the Gig" (2018). In a close-up of vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant, Stewart has captured her with head pitched back, nearly parallel to the floor, and mic in hand, eyes squeezed shut, in full-throttle, expressionistic mode.

He seems to have a sixth sense for what's sacred about those moments when per-

Dizzy Gillespie and Dexter Gordon, c. 1976 (left), and Walter Blanding "demonstrating Coltrane," 2002.



"God's Trombones, Harlem," 2009

formers pour their souls out in public.

Growing up in Chicago and Memphis, Stewart listened to gospel, blues, and jazz with his mother, Dorothy Jean Lewis Stewart, and her extended family, according to the exhibit catalog written by Ruth Fine, a former National Gallery of Art curator who organized this show and has collaborated with Stewart on others. "The emerging centrality of jazz," she notes, "may be tracked, in part, to his stepfather, the renowned jazz pianist Phineas Newborn Junior, with whom Stewart attended concerts in New York clubs in the 1950s, on 52nd Street, and in Greenwich Village." The show has a tender image of Newborn at the keys, with his childhood friend, Jamil Nassar, on bass, taken by Stewart in the 1970s. That personal tone, that profound depth of feeling and focus, carries through all of Stewart's photographs. It's even embodied in "God's Trombones, Harlem" (2009), the large-scale color print at the gallery's entrance: musicians in the foreground hold their instruments skyward, playing amid a faithful throng—everyone black-skinned, dressed in bright white—a celebratory scene that Stewart has captioned "Baptism in the Street."

—NELL PORTER BROWN



Regattabar and Scullers, both located in Cambridge hotels, may lack the same powder-keg excitement, but they draw better-known acts several nights a week. Yosvany Terry, an internationally acclaimed bandleader and Harvard senior lecturer in music, suggested both venues, although he admits that he himself performs in New York City most weekends. In November, Scullers hosts two 10-time Grammy Winners: legendary jazz trumpeter Arturo Sandoval (November 8 and 9) and pianist Eddie Palmieri (November 29). Regattabar's performances are booked through New York City's Blue Note Jazz Club, and feature a similar talent slate. Both offer pristine environments for undistracted jazz enjoyment. No jostling or fighting your way to the front of the room is required.

At Darryl's Corner Bar & Kitchen, a stylish soul-food spot in Boston's South End, some voice-raising might be necessary. The music rarely falls below forte, and the bass can be felt as well as heard. Servers wait for the briefest lulls in the action so they can hear the patrons' orders. What's fun is the funkier feel of the music at Darryl's—

a sharpness aided by the arguably overactive speakers—and guests dance in their seats, while standing in place, and in groups near the performers. Darryl's doesn't book just jazz, but the musicians are good, and the food is, too. One inebriated guest recommended Slade's Bar and Grill, a slightly cheaper soul-food joint down the block, which sometimes features live jazz. "Nothing's like Wally's, though," he clarified, before sauntering out. Also in the South End is The Beehive, a quieter and more bohemian restaurant with a nightly selection of live music. Depending on where you sit, the music could be more atmosphere than draw.

Just north of Harvard Square, the Lizard Lounge, recommended by Ingrid Monson, Quincy Jones professor of African-American music, presents a cozy cabaret-like viewing and listening experience and low-key pub



Members of Aardvark Jazz Orchestra

grub. On a Saturday night, the crowd is noticeably relaxed as they listen attentively to the chilled-out headlining folk group. The featured jazz artists tend to be a bit more contemporary and experimental than those at older-school venues: Club d'Elf, a frequent Lizard Lounge performer with a steady, hypnotic sound, markets itself as a "Moroccan-dosed Psychedelic Dub Jazz Collective." On leaving a show, it's tough to estimate how much time has passed. The Lilypad, another Monson recommendation, is an Inman

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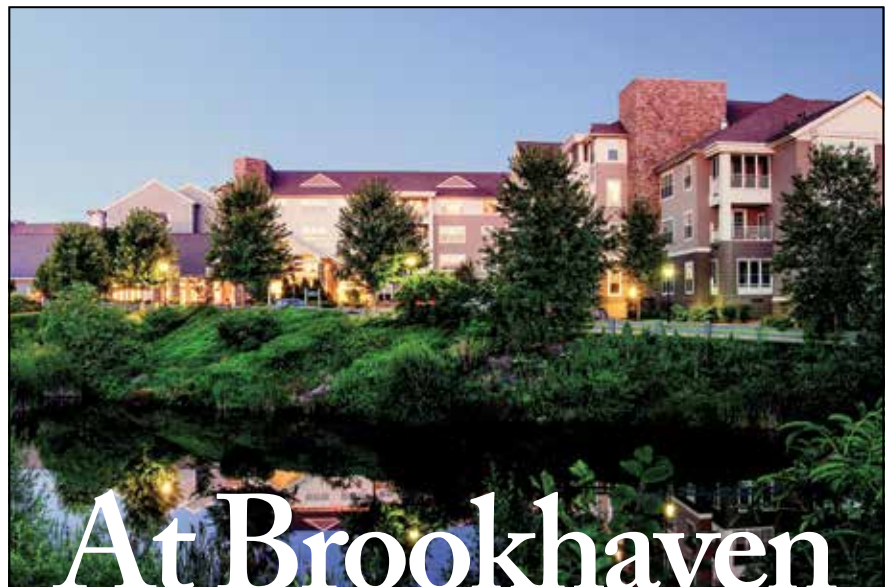
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Square hot spot for modern jazz and funk. Resembling an off-campus apartment's living room, the venue draws an audience that's mostly college-aged, or a bit older, with many attendees sporting creative facial hair and cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon. Avant-garde and bebop are the most represented genres on the calendar—a bit more raucous than smooth jazz. On one Saturday night, the ironically named dance-funk band Jeb Bush Orchestra, whose members wore short-shorts and sweatbands, had the crowd jaunty and loose. Just down the road, Outpost 186 offers an even smaller and more experimental setting. It would be wise to enter expecting less-than-traditional tonality. The room fits

only about three dozen people on metal folding chairs, and the walls are often covered in contemporary art installations. As local jazz musician and blogger Stephen Provizer has written “The skill level ranges from the competent to the ‘I can’t believe musicians as good as this are only playing for 10 people.’”

If many of Boston's historical jazz venues have fallen out, NEC, Berklee, Harvard, and MIT have helped fill the gap. A glance at the schools' schedules reveals numerous free, or inexpensive, concerts with some big names. NEC, with frequent free performances by faculty, students, and visiting artists, might be the top spot. At semesters' end, students often give recitals for a grade. You're in for

good performances; they need them to graduate. Presenting organizations like Global Arts Live, Celebrity Series, and Mandorla Music have picked up the slack as well, producing shows throughout Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville. As for seasonal jazz events, don't miss the Aardvark Jazz Orchestra's forty-seventh annual Christmas Concert, on December 14 in Emmanuel Church, on Boston's Newbury Street.

Boston might not have the jazz clout of New Orleans or New York City—or even of Kansas City, San Francisco, or Chicago—but that doesn't mean it's not a jazzy city. It's a matter of knowing where to look, and the desire to just get swinging.

CURIOSITIES: Reflections of Fatimah Tuggar

“Fatimah Tuggar: Home's Horizons,” at Wellesley College's Davis Museum through December 15, offers 26 large-scale works by the Nigerian-born, Kansas-based conceptual artist. Given her trajectory, from roots in Africa to studying at the Kansas City Art Institute and earning a master's in fine arts from Yale in 1995, it's perhaps not surprising to read in the exhibit materials that her multimedia projects explore “systems underlying human interactions with both high-tech gadgets and handmade crafts.”

Her 1997 photomontage *Working Woman* features a grinning woman in traditional Nigerian dress sitting cross-legged on the floor, sheltered by a handmade wooden windscreen. She's also surrounded by a land-line telephone, power strip, wall clock, and desktop computer—displaying on its screen a duplicate image of the entire *Working Woman* montage. It's as if the woman is dialing in, or into her self, as she appears in the virtual, commercial brand-happy contemporary age. *Home's Horizons* (2019) is a computer montage diptych that also speaks to cultural bifurca-

tion. The images reflect nearly mirrored blue skies and oceanic water, separated along a horizontal plane, that splits images of what might be a traditional, ancestral home on one side, and a modern gabled house, with the proverbial American white-picket fence, on the other.

A 2019 Guggenheim Fellow, Tuggar has received many other major awards and exhibited works internationally since the 1990s. The Davis Museum show is a major solo exhibition, however, and conveys Tuggar's sense of humor and playfulness, along with her nuanced cultural commentary. The commissioned installation *Deep Blue Wells* combines textiles, sculptures, video, and augmented reality (an interactive experience in which real-world elements are digitally enhanced). It evokes the centuries-old indigo dye-wells in the ancient city of Kano, Nigeria (among the last of their kind in operation) and reflects on the intersections of history, virtual reality, and globalization. See the work in person, and/or—in the spirit of computer-enabled communications—

learn more, directly from Tuggar herself, by visiting the campus virtually via a free “Artist Skype Talk” on November 19. ~N.P.B.

Clockwise from above:
Working Woman; *Home's Horizons*; and *Robo Entertains* (2001)

