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Rebuilding jazz scene

Molly Gilmore
By Molly Gilmore

If you visit The Spar's Web site at www.sparcafe.com, you'll read that the Olympia restaurant and bar has live jazz every Saturday night. But if you click on the events calendar, it's blank.

That's because The Spar is now owned by McMenamins (current information at www.mcmenamins.com), which has remodeled it to make more space for seating - and no space for performances.

In the four months since the restaurant's former incarnation closed, the South Sound jazz scene has been missing its center. There is still live, local jazz happening, though - if you know where to look. But apparently, a lot of jazz fans don't.

"Olympia really needed The Spar desperately, and now that it's gone, Olympia is hurting," said David Keys, a jazz pianist and publisher of Northwest Jazz Profile magazine. "The musicians are hurting, and they're world-class musicians."

"There's a whole bunch of us sitting around looking for the next Spar," said Michael Olson, who booked jazz at The Spar for the past five years.

So what are musicians doing?

"Playing out of town," said Olson, who plays percussion with local bands Obrador and Ocho Pies.

Keys, whose off-stage name is David Johnson, performs weekly at Southern Kitchen. He's doing so for little pay to help develop a new venue for jazz.

"I'm investing in the jazz program by taking a lot less money," he said. "We're trying to build that room so it can be sustainable."

"Olympia should have four or five places where jazz is being performed because there are that many top jazz musicians in the city," said Keys of Tacoma. Among them are pianist Joe Baque and saxophonists Gary Scott and Bert Wilson, who's opening for Grammy-winning jazz bassist Dave Holland on Monday at South Puget Sound Community College (see story in today's Weekend).

"Several years back, we had a bunch of clubs," Olson said. "In the '80s and early '90s, jazz was all over town, and then the economy went away and after the quake and Sept. 11 and all that stuff, it's been difficult for the downtown businesses. That's one of the reasons it's harder for us to find places to perform."

Meanwhile, Richard Lopez, who plays trombone with the Olympia Jazz Senators, Native Blue and Trombanga, said the crowds haven't yet made their way to newer jazz venues such as Trosper's in Tumwater, where his bands play regularly.

"We're just kind of scratching our heads," he said. "We know that there's a jazz community out there."

"I know there's an audience that craves it," Olson said. "Before The Spar was closing, there'd be 50 people standing outside wanting to get in" to the free Saturday night jazz concerts there.

It takes time for the jazz crowd to warm up to a new venue, Keys said.

"The jazz community has been disenfranchised so many times in Tacoma and Olympia that the audiences will not just run out. They have a wait-and-see attitude. They will come out if they believe that this place is going to continue with the jazz."

Keys has been playing Fridays at Southern Kitchen for about six months, but only in the past month has the show drawn a good crowd.

"People are driving down from Tacoma and up from Portland," he said. "And then Olympia is coming out. ... Now that it's catching on, maybe they can add another night."

"We've had jammers like Steve Munger and David Joyner," he added. "It's not a wide-open jam, but musicians are welcome to come through and sit in."

Both Olson and Lopez pointed out that recent Olympia stops by national acts such as the Preservation Hall Jazz Band and the Count Basie Orchestra attracted large and enthusiastic audiences.

"When the Count Basie band was here at Olympia High School, members of the Olympia Jazz Senators, which is the local big band, were in line," Lopez said. "We were shocked at the crowd that showed up for this concert."

"We talked to people in line and asked them, 'Did you know there was a local big band here in Olympia?' and lots of people didn't know."

Mike Barrett, who owns Trosper's, said, "The jazz fans are all on e-mail lists, and they all e-mail back and forth that they don't know where to go, which I find interesting."

Trosper's - which will change its name to the Brick Wood Fire Grill in conjunction with a remodel planned for summer - is offering jazz at least two nights a week and beginning to bring in more Saturday acts as well. Barrett has been emphasizing jazz since he purchased the restaurant more than a year ago, but said most people still think of Trosper's as a hangout for a young and heavy-drinking crowd.

"People think, 'Oh, that's probably not the right place,'" he said. "That's the image we're changing, and that's what jazz will help do."

At Art House Designs, which frequently hosts jazz shows by both national and local artists, crowds are growing and the schedule is getting fuller.

"Right now, there's a lot of activity," said Steven Bentley, a jazz drummer who books shows at Art House. "Right now, it is like every week." (Coming up next are the avant-garde Illuminasty Trio at 8 p.m. today and the Hal Galper Trio at 8 p.m. March 30.)

But Bentley said jazz fans are looking for more.

"I used to have a weekly jam session. I've had a lot of people ask me, 'Are you going to start that up again?' which indicates to me that they don't know where to hear jazz."

Keys is urging musicians to join him in developing new venues.

"I'm not sure if Olympia musicians are of the attitude that they're very artistic," he said. "A lot of times, art only will have you unemployed. It is a business, and somebody has to step out and create new performance venues. That's the nature of jazz worldwide and music worldwide."

In fact, he sees the situation in Olympia as emblematic of the status of jazz nationwide.

"Jazz is alive and well in America," he said. "But we need to get it not only from the schools but back into the hands of the general population."

Olson, for his part, is looking for just the right spot where jazz can flourish as it did for so many years at The Spar.

"I don't want to do a jazz series like the one at The Spar and have it last three or four months and then have to start all over again. I want to help all my brothers and sisters that are musicians in this town back into a steady club.

"The audiences are there, without a doubt," he said. "The trick is finding somebody who can afford to take a risk and is able to pay those musicians." venues in south sound

Here's a sampling of venues that offer free local jazz.

In addition, Art House Designs hosts frequent jazz concerts and South Puget Sound Community College's Minnaert Center is offering a jazz series this season.

Ben Moore's, 112 Fourth Ave. S.W., Olympia: Pianists Michael Moore from 6 to 9 p.m. Thursdays and George Seidel from 6:30 to 9 p.m. Fridays. 360-357-7527.

Cielo Blu, 514 Capitol Way S., Olympia: Vince Brown, Eliza Welch and LaVon Hardison from 5 to 8 p.m. Sundays. 360-352-8007. (See story about Red & Ruby in today's Weekend section)

Red Lion Hotel Olympia, 2300 Evergreen Park Drive, Olympia: The Russ Hubley Jazz Band from 8 to 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. 360-943-4000.

Southern Kitchen, 621 S. Capitol Way, Olympia: David Keys Trio from 6 to 9 p.m. the first three Fridays of each month. 360-943-8300.

Trosper's Bar & Grill, 709 Trosper Road S.W., Tumwater: The Olympia Jazz Senators from 7 to 9 p.m. first and third Mondays of each month, with a local high school jazz band opening from 6 to 7 p.m.; live jazz from 7 to 9 p.m. Wednesdays (Native Blue plays the first and third Wednesdays of each month); Trombanga, 9 p.m. the first Saturday of each month. 360-753-6626.