

STRAIGHT AHEAD

THE MUSIC OF CENTER STREET:

Des Moines' Lost Jazz Hub

Editor's Note: The following excerpts are from a thesis written by Drake student and saxophonist Roland Hart. If you would like a copy of the full paper, which details the history of Center Street, email roland.hart@drake.edu

The Center Street neighborhood was once a thriving African American entertainment district in Des Moines. Located slightly west of downtown, Center Street was lined with clubs, restaurants and businesses that rivaled those of Kansas City and Chicago. Today, the heart of the once vibrant district has been torn out, replaced largely by parking lots, industrial parks, and a freeway. While the physical remnants of Center Street have disappeared, the memories of the once great neighborhood are still alive.

The Heyday of Center Street

By the early 1920s, Center Street had become a thriving neighborhood and entertainment district. Its entertainment profile was established in 1920, when one of Center Street's first performance venues, Theater Lincoln, opened at Twelfth and Center, hosting shows produced by



A busy Saturday night at the Sepia Club in the late 1940s.

African Americans. By the following year, the Theater Lincoln shared a building with a restaurant (the Garden Café) and the Shelburn Gardens, which quickly became the leading nightclub in the area. Frequent performers at the Shelburn included the Dysart Band and the Peerless Melody Band.

The Shelburn would later be known as the Billiken Ballroom, and was perhaps the best nightclub on Center Street. The first show was held on September, 19, 1938, and featured Flip Benson and his Famous Harlem Aces for a fee of fifty cents. The Billiken hosted famous musicians such as Josephine Baker, Nat "King" Cole, and T-Bone Walker as headline

acts with affordable cover charges. The Billiken was also a hot spot for famous big bands such as the Count Basie Orchestra, Les Hite and the Cotton Club Orchestra, and the Duke Ellington Orchestra, whose members would play at jam sessions following their gigs at downtown hotels and venues. These jam sessions happened on most nights, and allowed local jazz musicians to play with some of the most famous performers in the nation.

The Billiken was the only ballroom in Des Moines that always granted African Americans attendance. Bouncers at the other ballrooms in town would often refuse to let

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Editor's Take

In honor of April being Jazz Appreciation Month, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank some of the many people who recently showed their appreciation for jazz by volunteering their time to CJC.

Thanks to music teachers **Rene Bernard and Karla Killinger** for hosting a successful Junior High Jazz Fest at Indian Hills Junior High School. Thanks to **Scott Davis, Randy Hoepker and Michael Giles** for coordinating the Jack Oatts Honor Band at Hoover High.

Thanks to **John Krantz** for keeping the CJC website up-to-date.

Thanks to the **CJC Big Band** for packing the house on the third Sunday of every month at Java Joe's. Thanks to **Rich Mintz** for coordinating the adult jam sessions at the same venue.

As always, thanks to **Abe Goldstien** for his assistance with the first Sunday of the month jam sessions, and a special thanks to **David Cunningham** for handling the April session while Abe was out of town.

Thanks to Nadine Calhoon's daughter, **Claudine Herrod**, for a generous donation to the Stu Calhoon scholarship fund.

Of course, thanks to the many local jazz musicians, broadcasters and promoters who continue to enrich our lives and community with their music.

And most of all, thanks to **Phyllis Leaverton**, who continues to inspire us all with her commitment to CJC.

Joel Poppen, Editor



Rose Marie



Joanne Jackson



Helen Gale



Ellen Rucker



Marcia Miget



Irene Myles

Women In Jazz

by Nadine Calhoon

While digging through a box of old audio tapes, I discovered a treasure of music that I had forgotten about. There were four sides of two tapes entitled "Women In Jazz 1984." So naturally I located my old tape player and listened. That forgotten sound of jazz was (please forgive) sound to my ears.

Such a treasure of music reminded me of what was once on the Des Moines scene. We had women playing and singing. They performed trios, duos and solos. They played piano and they sang. We had at least two talented drummers, also saxophone and clarinet players. We have not heard their sounds for a long time but I would like to recall their names that are on these tapes. Rose Marie, Irene Myles, Helen Gale, Janey Hooper, Rowena, Ellen Rucker all playing and singing. Nancy Bierma, Marcia Miget, Diane Moser. These women all brought the audience to their feet.

Listening to these women reminded me of others — Sue Oatts, Barb Cree, Linda Fitch and Terri Evans. Some are still on the jazz scene, others have retired or left us for greener pastures. They all have given me much good listening pleasure and I miss them. I, for one, would like another "Women In Jazz" tape.

STRAIGHT AHEAD

Straight Ahead is published quarterly by the Greater Des Moines Community Jazz Center. We welcome any and all contributions to this newsletter, including book, concert and CD reviews, editorials, concert news and any other information that would be of interest to CJC members. Please send your articles and information to Abe Goldstien, c/o Trilix, 9105 Northpark Drive, Johnston, IA 50131. Materials can also be e-mailed to abe@trilixgroup.com. For information about advertising in *Straight Ahead* or to receive future copies of the publication, contact Phyllis Leaverton at 515-276-0777.

Jazz Is Not A Museum Piece

By Abe Goldstien

Jazz is a living and breathing organism that continues to grow and evolve, bringing jazz fans a whole new world of surprises.

Several new releases from today's generation of jazz musicians reassure me that jazz is alive and vibrant as it has been for more than 100 years.



Ellery Eskelin: Trio New York II—Tenor player Ellery Eskelin, organist Gary Versace and drummer Gerald Cleaver advance the concept of the organ trio with their second release on the Prime Source label. Enjoy fresh takes on some organ trio classics like The Midnight Sun and Flamingo, plus their take on some standards and Monk's We See.

Federico Ughi: Quartet—New York City drummer Federico Ughi keeps the pianoless quartet sound going strong with his newest release featuring Kirk Knuffke on cornet, David Schung on alto and Max Johnson on bass. Imagine Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry, but with a 2013 sensibility to their interplay and improvisations.



Enrico Pieranunzi: Live at the Village Vanguard—True it's a piano trio and it's live at the Village Vanguard, but the piano trio has come a long way since the drummer on this set broke new ground with the Bill Evans trio in the same club back in the early 1960s. Paul Motian sparks Italian pianist Pieranunzi and bassist Marc Johnson through a set of jazz standards and originals.

Stephen Riley: Hart-Beat—The airy sound of his tenor reminds you of Lester Young and Warne Marsh, but the instrumentation of the group is definitely Rollins — tenor sax, bass (Neal Caine) and drums (Billy Hart). It's a winning combination for a fresh take on jazz classics by Thelonius Monk and Joe Henderson, plus a wake-up call for the old tune Mr. Sandman.



You can find these recordings and more at www.jazzloft.com and www.downtownmusicgallery.com.

Jammin' With CJC

by Hannah Marks

I first started going to the monthly CJC jam sessions almost two years ago after hearing about them from bassist Patrick Herrera. I had no idea what to expect when I walked into Java Joe's that summer day.



Upon arrival, Abe ushered me onstage, and I began fumbling my way through a jazz standard surrounded by a handful of kids

and pianist Sam Salomone. My experience that day shattered the image I held of myself as a jazz bass player.

I think I blocked out much of what happened at that first jam because it was pretty traumatic. I vaguely remember managing to screw up almost every song I played, even while David Altemeier, my bass teacher, helped me read through the song from behind.

Despite that unfortunate beginning, I returned to the monthly CJC sessions. Because I was forced to play music I had yet to learn and adapt to players I had never played with, my playing began to improve. I met other students who enjoyed playing jazz, as well as some local professionals who sat in on the sessions to help out the younger students.

Now each month I look forward to the day I receive an email from Abe announcing the set of tunes for the jam. CJC Sundays at Java Joe's are the days when I can talk and play with good friends and learn from older musicians.

JAZZ AT JAVA JOE'S

STUDENT JAM W/CJC HOUSE TRIO: First Sunday of the month, 2-4 p.m.

CJC ADULT JAM SESSION: Fourth Wednesday of the Month, 7-9 p.m.

CJC BIG BAND: Third Sunday of the Month, 2-4 p.m.

JOHNSTON STATION BIG BAND: Fourth Sunday of the Month, 2-4 p.m.

All performances are free!

CENTER STREET: Des Moines' Lost Jazz Hub

(Continued from front page)

African Americans in, even when the performers were black. During the final years of the Center Street district, the Billiken would become the 790 Club, and would continue to entertain with live music.

The Sepia was one of the most notable Center Street jazz clubs active at this time. Originally the Harlem Club, the Sepia was owned by Seymour Gray and was home to the Gray Brothers Orchestra, which featured Seymour on bass and his brother Howard on sax. The Sepia was not only a jazz club, but home to the local chapter of the NAACP and the Black Musicians Union. In 1960, the Sepia would become the Collins Club and continued to present live jazz until it closed in 1966.

Part of the reason that Center Street clubs like the Billiken and Sepia became so popular was because of their Key Club system. While clubs were not allowed to serve beer and liquor after 2:00 a.m., patrons could store their own hard liquor in a locked box at the tavern, only accessible by the bartender and the patron. This made the clubs especially attractive to after-hours musicians and facilitated late night jam sessions, as the clubs were open twenty-four hours. Center Street never shut down, giving Des Moines the reputation of being the "Sin City of the Prairie."

While Center Street was a thriving community by day, it was best remembered for what went on at night. Not only were the bars and clubs filled with music and people, but the streets were always lively. Many families would drive to Center



Poster promoting a Billiken Club event and Billiken Club patrons in the 1950s.

Street, park their car, and sit on the hood to watch all the activity. The island parking spots in the center of the street were especially favorable for those seeking observational entertainment. Food vendors would wander the streets all night, selling tamales and tchotchkes to families and inebriated club goers.

The Musicians of Center Street

Center Street was home to a fine group of musicians and was visited by some of the biggest names in jazz history during the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. Many musicians came from other parts of the country to live and perform in Des Moines, while others got their start on Center Street and branched out.

Among the notable local musicians who played on Center Street, **Ernest "Speck" Redd**

was the most famous and respected. Nicknamed for the freckles on his face, Speck Redd was a pianist who taught and performed through



Center Street's golden age. During the 1950s and '60s, Redd led a band (Speck Redd and the Lads) that performed on Center Street and around Des Moines. Speck also played a role in educating the community, teaching music at East High School and hosting nightly jam sessions at the Billiken that local professional, touring, and amateur musicians were invited to attend. Notable musicians who attended these jam sessions included Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Nat King Cole, and Count Basie.

Redd's own students included several Des Moines natives who went on to become notable performers in their own rights, including pianist and composer Roger Williams, drummer Louie Bellson, and organist Sam Salomone. Redd battled kidney disease for much of his life, receiving regular dialysis treatments, and passed away in Des Moines in 1974.

Possibly the best known drummer of Center Street was **Bobby Parker**. Parker was one of the leading drummers in Des Moines for nearly fifty years, and played with many of

the jazz giants who passed through Des Moines including Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge, Eddie



Peabody, Pearl Bailey, Mary Lou Williams, The Harmonicats, and Art Tatum. Parker grew up on Center Street and started playing as a trap drummer in Center Street bars before the age of eighteen for \$1.50 a night. Parker used to sit in at the Sepia Club with the Gray brothers, and played with bassist Orville Cox, Francis "Cigar" Bates, and saxophonist Ellsworth Brown at the Billiken. Parker called Des Moines home until his death in 2011 at the age of 92.

Irene Myles

was one of the most famous singers from the Center Street era. She performed regularly at the Center



Street clubs with Bobby Parker and Rufus Spates on alto sax. Myles made a name for herself working with Billy Eckstine; when she returned to Des Moines, her shows were often frequented by jazz musicians and entertainers such as Dizzy Gillespie, Robin Williams, Ray Charles (who would occasionally sit in during her gigs).

Other musicians got their start on Center Street before leaving Des Moines to pursue their professional careers. Frank Perowsky, a saxophonist, spent his teen years on Center Street before leaving for Julliard, eventually becoming Liza Minnelli's music director. Others would leave Des Moines to tour with larger groups, but would later return home. **Sam Salomone** honed his skills on Center Street and was signed by famous touring groups such as Del Shannon ("Runaway") and later with The Duprees ("You Belong to Me"), but ultimately settled back in Des Moines.

The most famous musician of Center Street, however, only had a brief stay in Des Moines, although he frequently returned as a visitor. Cornetist Thad Jones was discharged from the army in 1946 in Des Moines, and worked on Center Street as an arranger and trumpet player for the local bands.

\\Jones only lived in Des Moines for a couple of years before leaving for Charles Young's band in Oklahoma City, but before departing he established a romantic relationship with a young woman. He would visit her periodically through the 1950s while on tour with Count Basie.

Remembering Center Street

Today, the Center Street neighborhood is only a memory. The once vibrant neighborhood has been leveled; parking lots sit where some of the greatest jazz masters once played. Remembering Center Street is becoming increasingly important with every year as those who knew its heyday comprise an increasingly small group. A person looking at 12th and Center Streets would have no indication that the parking lots around them once hosted some of the most important musicians in American and Des Moines history.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: ROLAND HART

Born in Cedar Rapids, Roland is currently completing his undergraduate degree in music and psychology at Drake University. He plays saxophone in the Drake jazz band and wind symphony as well as with various groups around town. Following graduation, he hopes to pursue graduate studies in psychology and continue playing professionally. Roland became interested in researching Center Street after hearing about it through several different people and sources. Many of the things he heard were conflicting and there was no comprehensive history that focused specifically on the musicians and clubs of Center Street.



Notes & Tones

From: Nate Sparks Thanks For The Honor

Thank you for honoring me at the Hall of Fame reception. I cannot thank you enough for all that you have done for me, with all the jam sessions and gigging opportunities. I have improved not only as a musician, but as a person by going to the monthly jam sessions since I was in the 8th grade. Please continue to make the monthly jam sessions happen, as they are instrumental to the development of young players.

From Katie Washut (Carolyn Adler's Daughter): Remembering Mom and CJC



Carolyn Adler

(Editor's Note: Long-time CJC volunteer Carolyn Adler passed away last year in Georgia. Her daughter, Katie sent us the following note with a contribution to CJC.)

Connor's Song is the not-for-profit organization of a very dear friend of mine who lost her son to a tragic infection a few years ago. She asked to whom she could make a donation in mom's memory and I suggested CJC, not only because mom so loved her time volunteering with the organization, but because Connor's Song is all about helping kids heal through art. It felt like a great fit.

From Civic Music Association: 2013/2014 Season

The 2013/14 Civic Music Association Concert Season features the following jazz performances:

- Joshua Redman Quartet on September 28, 2013
- New York Voices on October 26, 2013
- The Soul Rebels on November 15, 2013
- Kenny Barron and Dave Holland on February 24, 2014.

For more information, visit civicmusic.org.

From Metro Arts: Jazz In July Schedule Announced

Metro Art' Jazz in July is a month-long festival that celebrates jazz and art with free outdoor concerts throughout Greater Des Moines. Seventeen bands were selected to perform in the 2013 Jazz in July season. Each concert features an accomplished jazz group, children activities and food and drink vendors.

- 7/3: Turner Center Jazz Orchestra
at Des Moines Symphony's Yankee Doodle Pops
- 7/4: Community Jazz Center Big Band
at Urbandale 4th of July Celebration at Lions Park
- 7/6: Hendrik Meurkens & Gabriel Espinosa's Celebrando
and One Nite Stand at Evelyn K. Davis Park
- 7/7: Soya Vista Orchestra at State Capitol Grounds
- 7/11: John Morgan Big Band at Wesley Acres
- 7/12: Roxi Copland Band at Sylvan Theatre
- 7/13: Orquesta Alto Maiz at Waveland Park Golf Course
- 7/14: The Jazz Page at Waukee Centennial Park
- 7/18: Scott Davis Quartet at Des Moines Area
Community College - Ankeny Campus
- 7/19: GRUVE at Clive Festival at Clive Aquatic Center
- 7/20: Bella Soul featuring Tina Haase-Findlay
at 6th Avenue Corridor off 6th and College
- 7/21: Max Wellman at the Johnston Commons
- 7/25: Ballyhoo Foxtrot Orchestra
at Woodlands Creek Active Retirement Community
- 7/26: Salsa Vibe at Hispanic Educational Resources
- 7/27: Freddy Gazzo Band and Dave Rezek's Alpha
State Agents at the Finale Festival at West Glen
Town Center

**BOP ONLINE FOR MORE JAZZ INFO:
www.dmcommunityjazzcenter.org**



All We Are Saying is Give **Jazz** A Chance!

The main objective of the Greater Des Moines Community Jazz Center (CJC) is to provide young musicians the opportunity to develop their individual talent while performing with other students and professional musicians.

CJC continues to hold monthly **jam sessions for students** on the first Sunday of every month, 2 to 4 p.m. at Java Joe's Coffee House in downtown Des Moines. **The CJC Big Band** also performs at the same venues, 2 to 4 p.m., on the third Sunday of every month. Young musicians are encourage to join CJC Big Band rehearsals. In addition, CJC has recently added an **adult jam session** from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. on the fourth Wednesday of every month, also held at Java Joe's. Other CJC activities include the annual Des Moines Jazz Hall of Fame reception, middle school jazz band event and a high school honor band event. We also publish "Straight Ahead," our quarterly newsletter about the Des Moines jazz scene — past, present and future.

We thank you for your support of the Greater Des Moines Community Jazz Center through your memberships and contributions.

Membership Form

Patron \$30.00 Adults \$20.00 Student \$10.00

Name _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

email: _____

Mail this form with your check to: Phyllis Leaverton, 2921 Patricia Dr., Urbandale, IA 50322

Community Jazz Center
2921 Patricia Drive
Urbandale, Iowa 50322-6863

CJC Membership Form

- School [\$35] Patron [\$30] Adult [\$20] Student [\$10]

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Home Phone _____ Work Phone _____

Fax Number _____ Email _____

Volunteer Interests/Skills _____

Date: _____

Return to: CJC Membership Chair, 2921 Patricia Drive, Urbandale, Iowa 50322-6863