

Jackson Street Memoirs: Strolling Through Seattle's Jazz History

BY TODD MATTHEWS

If you wish to find the beginnings of jazz in Seattle, you have to start at the King Street Station. The aged train depot bordering the International District and Pioneer Square is just as important to the development of this area's jazz as the smoky backroom of a speakeasy or the stage of, say, Washington Hall on 14th and Fir. It was here, says writer and critic Paul de Barros, that musicians arrived to perform for a record number of loggers, fishermen, and sailors. And it was along nearby Jackson Street where Seattle jazz was born, starting in the early 1900s and lasting well into the 1960s.

Anyone familiar with jazz history surely knows of de Barros. The Seattle Times jazz critic, Earshot Jazz founder, DownBeat magazine contributor, and Jackson Street After Hours: The Roots of Jazz in Seattle author has captured the history and spirit of Seattle jazz for nearly two decades. When the Experience Music Project provided a walking tour of Jackson Street earlier this year (with de Barros as narrator and guide), nearly 100 people turned up for the opportunity to re-visit Seattle's raucous jazz roots. "Seattle may have been an outpost," de Barros told the crowd, his voice echoing through the train station, "but it certainly never lacked jazz." Some of the most notable jazz musicians either launched their careers in Seattle (Ray Charles, Quincy Jones, Ernestine Anderson) or played a number of gigs in the area ("Jelly Roll" Morton, Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Billie Holiday).

Though the history is rich, physical remnants have been razed, re-named, or forgotten, as the Jackson Street tour quickly proved. "You will have to use your imagination during this tour," de Barros cautioned the group. Indeed, the site of the first documented jazz club (opened by Russell "Noodles" Smith in 1912) is now a parking lot overlooking the Pioneer Square neighborhood. A few blocks away, the site of The Ebony (where the innovative "Jam For Breakfast" series was launched, serving all-night revelers through the break of dawn) is now a

Japanese restaurant. Across the street, the Green Dot (a barbershop/horse-racing window/back-room jazz club) is now a bank. Around the corner, the Basin Street (perhaps the most notable club, owned and operated by Chinese lottery winner Davey Lee) is now an International District community center. And the Black and Tan ("Seattle's most esteemed and longest-lived nightclub," says de Barros) is now in the basement of a building that is rumored to soon be demolished.

Still, the tour was an excellent opportunity to walk through the pages of Jackson Street After Hours. With de Barros leading the way, the group made a stop outside the Bucket of Blood (the rowdy venue popular with musicians, but notorious for a murder that took place on the sidewalk out front), slipped in the back door of what was once the Black Elk's Club (Ray Charles first performed there), and stared up in awe at the red façade of Washington Hall (Billie Holiday performed there in 1953). Jackson Street readers have a hard time walking the area without imagining raucous music pouring out onto the sidewalks, well-dressed musicians walking up and down the street from club-to-club, and a line of classic limousines moving slowly down the street. Moreover, touring

the area with its authoritative voice pointing out the notable clubs and landmarks served as a time warp of sorts for Seattle jazz enthusiasts.

The Jackson Street scene is long gone. Author de Barros cites several reasons for the scene's demise: hard-liquor was legalized in 1949; the desegregation of musician unions (club owners favored white musicians over black musicians); and the city's notorious "tolerance policy" (under which policemen were paid under the table for looking the other way when it came to gambling, prostitution and bootlegging) came to an end in 1969, when a number of city officials were indicted on charges of corruption. But the spirit of this scene is alive today, as evidenced by de Barros's book and historic walking tours.

Earshot Jazz: Was the history of jazz in Seattle something that most Seattle residents were aware of when you started working on this book? Or did you consider yourself to be 'unearthing' a history and story that few people knew?

Paul de Barros: I would say that the majority of people didn't know about it. Sure, most black people knew about it, and especially black people of a certain age who

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had been around in the 1940s. But African-American people in their forties today, or even younger, seem to be the most grateful that the history was written. Many younger black people come up to me and say, 'I'm so glad you wrote this book.'

Earshot: The only thing that's left of the Black and Tan is a yellow door on 12th Avenue. Similarly, the Green Dot is now a bank in the International District. What are your feelings about some of these historic buildings being replaced or demolished? Does it make a book like Jackson Street After Hours that much more of a necessary historical record?

PdB: I'm not a preservationist at heart. I am when it comes to beautiful or interesting buildings. When the Music Hall Theater was torn down, I thought it was a tragedy. I was sad to see the Savoy Ballroom torn down. It was originally a movie theater and a roller rink. That would have been a good one to preserve. Am I sad that the Congo Room and the Black and Tan weren't preserved? No. There wasn't anything there to start with, architecturally. Still, I think we should probably have some plaques in place. I feel guilty that I haven't pursued that. Someone may come along with more energy, and he or she may do it. I am not as tearful about old buildings disappearing. It made it more difficult to do the research. It made it quite mysterious, actually: 'Where were these places?' I had to get help from people who had lived through the period. It's too bad that we lose the physical part of the past. At the same time, we have to make a compromise.

Earshot: Throughout the tour, a couple people who visited many of the Jackson Street clubs provided the group with some insight and commentary on the scene. Does this happen often? Does it sometimes feel like the research is never finished?

PdB: The research is never finished. Community history is a fun history to write. Charles Payton, he is kind of the guru of community history and he works for the King County Landmarks and Heritage Program, got me going on this project. Back in 1989, when I displayed some of these jazz history photos, he said to me, 'Paul, don't feel bad, but when your exhibit comes out, that's going to be the beginning of your research, not the end.'

He was right. All those photos you collect from scrapbooks where people don't remember the names? Those people come forward. Every year I get telephone calls from people: 'That was me . . . that was my uncle . . .' That is just the nature of community history. I welcome that, especially when people correct something in the book. I tried to get everything right. Anybody that can bring new information or corrections, it all is incorporated as time goes by.

Earshot: If you could go back in time and visit one of the Jackson Street clubs, which club would it be?

PdB: The Rocking Chair. That was the classiest, the hippest. You really felt like you were in the scene. Everyone dressed up, they looked snazzy. Ray Charles's trio was playing there! Without question, the Rocking Chair.

Earshot: Do you see any similarities between the Jackson Street scene you describe in your book, and today's jazz scene in Seattle? Moreover, how does the story of Seattle's jazz roots inform area jazz musicians today?

PdB: I don't see any similarities. The music from that period is from another time, socially. It is before integration. It is essentially a Jim Crow scene. It is a scene informed by racism. There were racially separated musicians unions. It is a city informed by a corrupt government. It is informed by repressive blue laws about alcohol. It was a thriving underground working against a repressive society. It was a horrible time compared to everything that followed. It was everything we worked to overthrow in the '60s. On the other hand, this was a period when jazz was black music that took place in black neighborhoods. And I think that's why people are nostalgic about it. Like many black businesses, it was one of the casualties of integration. And that's too bad. I'd welcome a revival of jazz clubs in black neighborhoods. Dorthann Kirk, Roland Kirk's widow, thinks the demise of those neighborhood clubs is one of the reasons — or at least a symptom — for why the black audience has fallen off so drastically for jazz. As far as continuity between the Jackson Street days and today, yes I think there is some. I went into that in the book, because I thought it was a question of pro-

found importance. When I was finishing up the book, I was working for the Folklife Festival and thinking about folk traditions. Ethnomusicologists take this quite seriously: the notion of authenticity. I really wanted to ask myself, 'Was there that same kind of continuity — or 'tradition' — in Seattle?' I tried to pick that apart. One of the things that said there was continuity was that some of the Jackson Street players were still here. They continue to pass on music to the younger generation. When you talk to people like Marc Seales, who was he hanging out with early in his career? Floyd Standifer. Don Lanphere. Buddy Catlett. He knew jazz was a culture that was passed on from person to person.

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