



HOUSE OF JAZZ ANNIVERSARY

The long-running Aylmer St. hot spot that Charlie Biddle used to call home celebrated a quarter-century of memories this week with friends new and old



The house that jazz built

IRWIN BLOCK
THE GAZETTE

It wasn't the wildest jazz party, but there was no mistaking the emotional depth of the music and testimonials at the House of Jazz's anniversary celebration Monday.

A quarter-century of memories of Charlie Biddle and other jazz pillars came pouring out at the club that used to bear Biddle's name. There was much gratitude shown to George Durst, the enterprising restaurateur who made it all happen. Durst has been at the Aylmer St. location for 38 years, running the establishment under various names before transforming it into the Biddle's jazz club in 1980. The venue took about a year to take off, eventually becoming a mecca for live jazz in Montreal.

Such veteran friends of jazz as broadcaster Len Dobbin, Montreal International Jazz Festival co-founder André Ménard and stalwart players like saxophonist Richard Parris and pianist Tim Jackson gathered under the tiffany lamps and sparkling chandeliers to mark the anniversary, rare in the often fragile world of jazz.

No other jazz club in this city can boast a 25-year span of offering live music and, in the process, achieving a worldwide reputation. Musicians ranging from the late Sarah Vaughan to Wynton Marsalis have jammed at the club when they were in town for the jazz fest.

Pianist Oliver Jones's timing was impeccable in 1980 when he gave up on pop music and reverted to his first love, performing at his now-closed Bijou club in Old Montreal just before Durst booked him for a long-term residency at Biddle's. Jones hopped up on stage Monday and quipped, "Everyone over 60 is allowed on the bandstand."

He called up drummer Bernard Primeau - they worked for five years as a trio with Biddle at the club before Jones moved on to an international career.

"For me, who'd been playing pop music for so many years, it was such a novelty to say that I had a jazz gig that lasted and lasted," Jones reflected after a short set with singer Raneé Lee. "It truly was a springboard for me.

"I'm eternally grateful for the opportunity to finally get to play the music I wanted for so many years.

"I'll never forget it - no matter how far I go, and whether I retire or don't retire."

Lee recalled that she first performed at the club as "a rocker" in the late 1960s when it was called George's - before it became Maxwell's, then Stitches, then Biddle's.

Of the jazz revival in the early 1980s, Lee said, "Charlie was the initial cog in the wheel that made it happen with his personality, but it couldn't have succeeded without George - what a businessman!"

"A club that has survived 25 years must have needed some muscle behind it, because I think it's unheard of in the jazz annals of Montreal," Ménard said. "Some years were leaner than others, but (Durst) always kept the place rolling."

Pianist Josh Rager - who plays the early show every Friday and Saturday with saxophonist Johnny Scott - is one of the younger musicians who are happy to have regular work at the club. "This is real on-the-job work experience, hard to get these days," he said.

Bassist Miles Perkin, another House of Jazz regular, is grateful for the gigs that have helped him grow - and pay for his studies at McGill. "It's a really good chance for me to play a couple nights a week and keep those quarter notes in check," he said.

Pianist Min Rager notes that the club is quite different from Upstairs, another long-running Montreal jazz club, which has a focus on contemporary music. At House of Jazz, the accent is on the "entertainment" function of music, with an emphasis on standards and vo-

calists, she noted.

The anniversary evening featured vocalist Barbara Secours performing sassy standards, and the exquisite Nancy Martinez's sensuous take on similar material. Their new CDs are among four recorded live at the club and released recently.

Powerful Michelle Sweeney belted out Amazing Grace and expressed her gratitude to Durst for regular work, saying, "I never wished for a lot in life. I just wanted to sing and take care of my children."

Drummer Primeau, who used to book bands at the club, noted that the House of Jazz is not a place where people come only for the music. "People come here to talk and eat and have a good time - it's not a concert hall."

Durst is proud that he's been at the Aylmer St. spot for so long, and he has just signed a lease for another 15 years. Still, he said, "My deepest memories are with Charlie and Oliver."

The House of Jazz is at 2060 Aylmer St. Call (514) 842-8656.

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Oliver Jones and Raneé Lee heated up the House of Jazz stage Monday during the club's anniversary party.

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