

Both in its scattered venues and its spontaneous style, Toronto's jazz scene is finding new life through improvisation

Cats on the move, dig it?



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The Rex Hotel on Queen West is the heart of the revived jazz scene. It's hosting 82 gigs this month alone, including, above, the Quinsin Nachoff Rhodes Trio, with Nachoff on sax.

BY MIKE DOHERTY

With the demise of the Montreal Bistro last month and The Top of the Senator last spring, Toronto lost its two highest-profile jazz clubs. Cue much wringing of hands and gnashing of saxophone reeds. Nonetheless, ever-resourceful musicians, bookers and club owners are ensuring that the jazz scene is as diverse and exciting as ever — you just have to know where to look.

"There's a scene," local tenorman Quinsin Nachoff says, "because there's all these schools putting out amazing players — U of T, Humber, York. And, hopefully, these people are going to come out and make opportunities for themselves. It's a drag because you've got to spend time [looking for gigs], but it's a more integrated scene."

Nachoff is one of an increasing number of jazzers playing with drastically different ensembles and using elements of various styles (in his case, from classical to funk to rock). As a composer and bandleader, he is invested in the kind of cross-pollination that, admittedly,

and play without preconceived notions or preordained charts and, in some cases, without even having met before.

At select venues, audiences can hear music that takes jazz as a starting point and launches itself into the unknown.

Lounge on a Sunday evening, because that's why they're there. [The venues] are off the beaten track a little bit."

As Aldcroft explains, audiences need not find fully improvised music forbidding: "You just need time, patience and a desire to learn. And

Hotel, now the grand old man of Toronto jazz clubs, which boasts 82 shows in the month of August alone, featuring everything from big bands to vocalists to electric fusion acts. South of the Annex, a lesser-known venue, the Red Guitar, has a similarly open-ended policy, albeit in a much smaller space.

"I'm trying to provide a large cross-section of the music community and the jazz community," explains owner, booker and vocalist Corry Sobol. "Toronto's such a diverse city, I really feel it's important to show that diversity. We book a lot of fabulous female jazz musicians and musicians from different cultural communities, where there's a blending of different kinds of music with jazz."

The Red Guitar has a more liberal booking ideology than the Senator or the Bistro did, but it shares a quiet policy with those late lamented clubs. "It's a much more pleasurable experience to play to a room that's

Mondays at the Orbit Room, Norah Jones sideman Kevin Breit uncorks a swinging version of Rockin' in the Free World

was not the strength of either the Bistro or the Senator. Jazz, as a living music, has always avoided the straight and narrow.

Certainly one hallmark of jazz, as anyone defines it, is improvisation, and a growing number of players in Toronto are turning to spontaneous composition, a wide-open type of music where musicians sit down

Ken Aldcroft, who books bands at the Now Lounge (189 Church St.) and is a director of AIM (Association of Improvising Musicians) Toronto, says, "I've realized that for improvised music, playing in a bar isn't really the best choice. These venues allow it to happen in a good way. You're not going to scare off anyone at Arraymusic, or the Now

keep coming back, even if you think it was the weirdest, stupidest thing you've ever heard. In improvised music, it's a fine line between great and OK, and it can go from minute to minute. We just play hard and give it our all. It's really true music."

For those seeking jazz that is more immediately accessible, there's always Queen Street's Rex



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Yorkville lounge Sopra is quiet now, but after it gets its liquor licence, jazz singer Julie Michels and the patrons will all be making noise. Below, a second look at Nachoff playing the Rex.

interested and engaged and really listening to the performance," Sobol says.

On the other hand, the newcomer to the scene, Sopra, believes in "symbiosis." "There has to be a certain noise tolerance," says co-owner Paolo Paolini, who, with chef Massimo Capra, spent \$1.7-million renovating the disused showroom and office space above their restaurant, Mistura, to create the club. "It's beautiful music — we want to hear it, but I also sometimes have people who might still be conducting business."

True to its Yorkville location, Sopra will cater to an affluent clientele — it features a VIP lounge and sells year-long memberships for \$1,500 a crack (there's a waiting list). Nonetheless, it should keep musicians happy, what with an \$80,000 Steinway baby grand, good acoustics and an apparently healthy pay scale.

The club doesn't see itself as a replacement for either the Senator or the Bistro, but it will, to some extent, pick up their slack. Says Julie Michels, who books the room and also sings there: "When the Bistro closed, several top-drawer musicians had [booked] CD releases — it's important that we give these people an environment in which they can play."

Like her colleagues in the new Toronto jazz scene, she is mindful of the potential pitfalls of a booking policy that stresses the conservative side of jazz. "Regardless of the genre," she says, "if you give fine musicians an opportunity to play in a good room with a great clientele,

with management who appreciates them, I believe that good music is a sustaining entity. Flexibility is an absolute necessity. Specialization is necessary only for insects. To stay alive, all higher forms of life need to be adaptable."

Arraymusic 60 Atlantic Ave.: A loft space accommodating local and international musicians in a friendly environment on weekends. You're likely to see everything from otherworldly scat-singing to booker and percussionist Joe Sorbara making music by rubbing a balloon. This ain't "jazz" as Wynton Marsalis knows it, but who cares?

Orbit Room 580A College St.: This narrow upstairs lounge has a Hammond B3 organ and occasionally books jazz with a soulful, bluesy flavour. On Mondays, in-demand guitarist Kevin Breit, with his band, The Sisters Euclid, unleashes all the wild solos he's kept under wraps while playing with the likes of Cassandra Wilson and Norah Jones. His swingin' cover of *Rockin' in the Free World* is a highlight.

Pilot Tavern 22 Cumberland St.: The "Stealth Lounge" on the second floor of this Yorkville bar accommodates a refreshingly unpretentious crowd for good-natured jazz on Saturday and Sunday evenings.

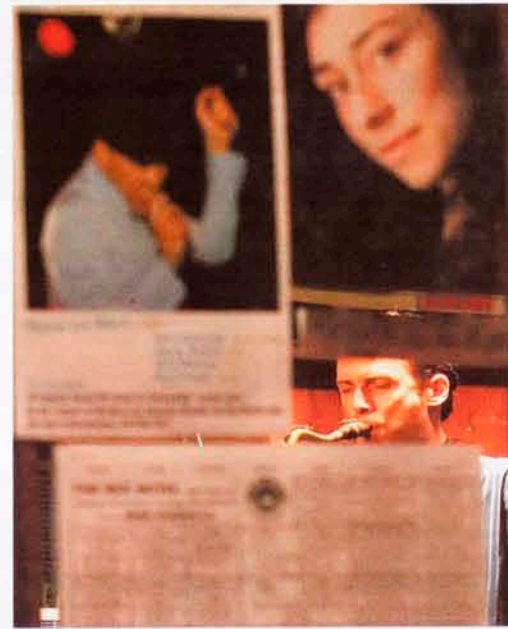
Reservoir Lounge 52 Wellington St. E.: The swing revival isn't dead; it's just gone underground — literally, at this basement bastion of jump blues, '40s suits and good-time lindy-hop-inducing music.

Red Guitar 603 Markham St.: A small, warm venue with pleasant staff and some of Toronto's best jazz cats playing Wednesday through Sunday. Take note: the club is for sale. Owner Corry Sobol says the music will continue indefinitely, but hopes to find a buyer from the jazz community who will continue her live-music booking policy. An endangered species worth supporting.

Rex Hotel 194 Queen St. W.: A laid-back venue that takes its music seriously, The Rex has been supporting young musicians and attracting special international guests since the late '80s. It has made the most of a late-'90s renovation that eliminated the grunge, de-greased the menu and polished the stained glass above the bar. Cover charges are slim and multi-generational crowds are lively and respectful. Long may the Rex reign.

Sopra Upper Lounge 265 Davenport Rd.: At the time of publication, the club was still waiting for its liquor licence, so the jury is still out. It is, however, a beautiful space with large, comfortable booths, an alabaster bar and warm wood walls — just make sure you're not seated behind one of the large curved (and structural) pillars if you want to see the band. "When we want to have a good time," co-owner Paolo Paolini says, "it usually involves company, food, booze and music. We've hit all of them. We won't mention the sex — that's outside of these premises."

Trane Studio 964 Bathurst St.: A



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bastion of hipness in the no-man's land just north of Bloor on Bathurst, this contemporary jazz and world/soul fusion venue features mood lighting, cocktails, and swanky grooves.

Tranzac 292 Brunswick Ave.: The front room in this Aussie/Kiwi bar

is like a friend's living room — it's the most intimate space in town for improvised music, where musicians can play without amplification, and the booking is eclectic (by no means always jazz) and adventurous. Bonus points for great craft beer on tap.