

t always begins this way — with a moment of mystical clarity and ease, eyes closing of their own accord. The head starts to sway side to side with the steady pizzicato of the upright bass. A sound so open and full, you could stand in it.

Then comes the circular sound of brushes on a snare drum — fluid, guitar and piano key flavors, and finally, floating on top, a voice: *Oh, I hate to see the evening sun go down, 'cause my lovin' baby done left this town...*

Jazz, at its best, is less a style of music than a state one slips into. And, as it happens, there's a place in Eugene dedicating itself fulltime to creating such rare, holy moments.

On The Jazz Station's stage this particular night, the voice singing "St. Louis Blues" belongs to Nancy Crider, an oft-featured vocalist of remarkable depth and agility. She furrows her brow slightly on the highest note, microphone held close to her mouth, while her husband, John Crider, plays piano behind her, in sync with guitarist Spencer Doidge. Chris Orsinger, the man plucking the upright bass, smiles with satisfaction.

Orsinger and the Criders are among The Jazz Station's original founders, and the whole band is quite familiar with the dynamics of this club, where the air is always thick with the dark, lush heaviness of a crowd saturated with one desire: diggin' on jazz. Many nights, there's not an empty seat to be found in its downtown Eugene storefront, and competition for groove space on the dance floor is cutthroat.

In short, The Jazz Station is the Eugene jazz community's watering hole — a dynamic center connecting players and listeners alike.

The venue has grown quickly since its creation in 2005, becoming regionally established and sought after by touring artists. It continues to support local performers in addition to packing the house for bigger acts, and it also offers workshops, rehearsal space and recording equipment.

Reaching The Jazz Station's current status was the work of an impassioned few, and that few has grown exponentially — though flexibility of genre boundaries may be needed to keep younger generations involved in coming years. This country's great Jazz Age of the 1920s is long past, of course, and it could be that if the genre itself is to remain vital, it must adapt and evolve to capture the imagination of new listeners while retaining its traditional audience.

BIRTH OF THE COOL

The Jazz Station is equal parts musical excellence and community culture, and it's become the envy of some cities twice Eugene's size. Its beginnings, though, were humble to say the least. The club was borne of a basic need among jazz players for a space to jam, practice and perform — at a price suited to a musician's meager budget.

"John and Nancy [Crider] and I were playing gigs around the area from about 2004 on," says Orsinger, former president of the Willamette Jazz Society (WJS). "Basically, we've always loved talking about ways we could make it better — better opportunities to play that really helped jazz grow. And then I get a call from John and Nancy, and they say, 'Well, we've rented a little place downtown, and will you help us put on some shows this summer?'"

Orsinger, who is also the executive director of the nonprofit Friends of Buford Park and Mt. Pisgah, immediately saw greater long-term potential in the idea. He suggested that WJS take responsibility for the venue, allowing for stability and tax-deductible donations. He whipped up a membership form detailing monthly,

recurring donations and "talked up" the project to his network of players, eventually rounding up enough memberships to secure the first few months' rent.

On July 21, 2005, The Jazz Station opened in its original location: a 700-square-foot shoebox of a room at 67 W. Broadway, complete with stage lights fashioned from coffee cans.

Ted Ledgard, a current Jazz Station member-volunteer, remembers the first venue as "so limited in space that you couldn't get more than about 10 people in this place. So you'd have two or three musicians playing, with the audience sitting 5 feet away ... it was all going on, right there in your lap."

But, as Ledgard says, "It grew, in spite of itself." The space proved perfectly conducive to Sunday afternoon open jams — The Jazz Station's first regularly scheduled event — as well as establishing the venue as a place for jazzers in Eugene to build relationships.

"It was where the community developed its roots," says Orsinger, who watched John and Nancy get married at the venue in 2006.

Orsinger assumed from the start, though, that the operation would outgrow its location. The jazz community's burgeoning solidarity came with a growing desire to perform and, as audience numbers swelled, the necessity for more space kept nagging.

A LOVE SUPREME

On April 1, 2011, an all-new Jazz Station opened further west on Broadway with a relatively roomy space of 2,500 square feet.

In addition to continuing Sunday jams, the new venue began producing live shows Thursday through Saturday as well as hosting First Friday ArtWalk receptions and member get-togethers.

Here, the stage was set up with bona-fide track lights, while the main floor had seating for 70. The room was lit by delicate paper-maché light fixtures wall-mounted among a rotating art exhibit, and the walls themselves matched the full-bodied red of the wine served at the new bar by the entrance.

The digs may have been less classic-cool than the busy, smoky jazz clubs of yore, but it was a nice place. Things were looking rather rosy for The Jazz Station.

The transformation was, however, not without its growing pains. The renovation costs totaled more than \$30,000. After gaining \$5,000 in supporter contributions, another \$22,000 in loans still had to be secured; one \$15,000 chunk was acquired from the city of Eugene's Downtown Revitalization Loan Program.

The spike in rent at the new address also required an intensive push for membership, not to mention a push for existing volunteers to help build the place, as plumbing and electricity were the only things WJS could afford to install professionally.

With the help of a few dedicated souls, retired jazz historian and WJS volunteer Robert Sposato created The Jazz Station that exists today — from building the stage to painting the walls — and he still stops by to make touchups.

Sposato also recently took on a series of biweekly Jazz Station shows focusing on classic, melodic arrangements; he says he spends "five or six hours every morning" organizing these shows.

Fierce spirits of volunteerism like Sposato's are, in essence, The Jazz Station's lifeblood, seeing as no one involved in WJS makes any money.

The time and effort Sposato dedicates to The Jazz Station has been frustrating at points, but he finds it worthwhile to stay active in ensuring the club's growth.

"It's got everything right," he says. "It's got a good lease, not expensive. It's in a good town; incredible musicians, a big enough jazz base of audience. They should be packing the audience just about for every show by now."

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