

'When audiences listen, musicians play better. Period. Especially in jazz.'

— BASSIST AND JAZZ STATION CO-FOUNDER CHRIS ORSINGER

MY FAVORITE THING

Ledgard and Rieser agree that the strongest force contributing to the building of the organization's momentum over the past few years has been, quite simply, "the quality of the music."

After spending even one night at The Jazz Station, it's clear why musicians play well there. Unlike other Eugene venues that provide occasional jazz, Jazz Station audiences listen actively rather than focus on food, drink or conversation.

The acute audience attention given to each musician on stage directly affects the nature of the exchange. And since jazz stands alone in its ultimate dependency on real-time improvisation for its power, the already symbiotic performer-audience relationship is all the more essential.

"It is, to me, a spiritual practice," says Orsinger, who adds that any time he plays bass at The Jazz Station, he's influenced by the power of deep, mutual respect and reverence for the present, an element he considers integral

to the jazz art form.

"When audiences listen, musicians play better. Period. Especially in jazz," Orsinger says. "This is what these people are offering. They're offering all these years of preparation and excellence."

From a performance perspective, Orsinger is not alone in his preference for The Jazz Station.

Vocalist Halie Loren, a Eugenean of 15 years, has gained world-class recognition over the past decade; she's been featured in such major publications as *Jazz Times* and *All About Jazz* and was recently rated Billboard Japan's No. 1 jazz artist. Even with her international success, Loren says playing a venue that equals The Jazz Station's attentiveness and intimacy is a rarity.

"There aren't a lot of strictly listening venues, just in general, unless they're the larger concert halls," she says. "The Jazz Station is, like, this great music club." She adds, "The U.S. in general is losing them, just in droves."

The decline in jazz venues that Loren notices may

hold true nationally as well, but its occurrence in the Pacific Northwest is undeniable, and the evidence hits dishearteningly close to home. For instance, in the past year alone, Portland has seen three jazz clubs — Blue Monk, Ivories and TaborSpace — shut their doors.

If there's a silver lining in the shrinking of Portland's jazz club scene, it's the space it leaves for smaller, homegrown venues to become West Coast jazz destinations.

For instance, Carl Woideck, UO jazz history professor, host of KLCC's "The Soul of Jazz" radio show and a locally gigging saxophonist, says he's perceived an interest from the Portland jazz community "to create something like The Jazz Station — a nonprofit musicians' society that would help sponsor gigs and be a support system for musicians. And so far, they've found it really rough-going. So I would say that Eugene, although it's a much smaller market than Portland, does have something that Portland does not."

The spillover of Portland audiences looking for jazz may benefit The Jazz Station short-term, but as "jazz fusion" becomes more pop than jazz and straight jazz's slice of the popular music industry keeps shrinking, there's much more at stake than The Jazz Station's name — or any venue's name, for that matter.

YOU MAKE ME FEEL SO YOUNG

Woideck says that in his interactions with college-age students, it seems what keeps many young people from engaging in jazz is that "in many cases, jazz is perceived as being an abstract music that's difficult for people to understand."

There are myriad cultural factors that could explain this popular conception: jazz studies programs in higher academia pushing for cerebral virtuosity; contemporary artists (such as award-winning trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire) playing jazz so abstract and experimental it limits its listenership to jazz players; or, plainly, the ineffable condition of a trend-driven popular culture. Maybe the Jazz Age has passed, and that's all.

Whatever the case may be, the American jazz tradition can only be perpetuated by finding ways once again to catch the ear of the purely recreational listener — the same fan who grabs onto the singable melodies and danceable percussion of pop music.

In its heyday, jazz was "a very social music," Woideck says. "People, you know, dated to jazz. It was America's popular music."

But any social music begs for a social atmosphere to be played in, and maintaining support of community-centric, all-ages venues like The Jazz Station is an important step on the path to reclaiming jazz as a popular genre.

Less stuffy than a concert hall, less dingy than a bar, The Jazz Station is where "large crowds find the music really accessible, really approachable," Woideck says.

One problem is that, according to Rieser, while younger fans are often in attendance, it's spotty, and The Jazz Station's consistent core of audience members lacks young folks. Rieser seeks to engage with younger generations by pursuing strong relationships with Eugene's universities. Any time UO jazz ensembles perform off-campus, it's almost always at The Jazz Station, and some professors assign Jazz Station performances to the combo groups they coach.

The Jazz Station has yet, however, to become as involved with area high schools, which Rieser describes as having "some very good players ... there's three from South Eugene High School that are all, I would say, bordering on professional quality." His plans for future outreach include summer jazz camp scholarships and, potentially, a band of Jazz Station regulars that would perform standards at area high schools.



TRUMPET
PLAYER
PARKPOOM
AEMPOO
PLAYING
WITH EUGENE
COMPOSERS'
BIG BAND

PHOTO BY ATHENA DELENE