

Singapore Jazz

A Copy of an Article on Jazz in Singapore, which appeared in a Japanese paper

Jazz is one of America's most notable contributions to the world. It is a uniquely American artform, first because it was born in America out of the Afro-American Slave experience, and second because of the spirit of individualism which is inherent of Americans. Now almost 100 years since the birth of Jazz, it no longer belongs only to one people, because it has spread across the globe becoming a language familiar to musicians and fans in every country. Kids worldwide are learning to improvise music using the Jazz styles born in America, hence adding to the Jazz language their own unique background and cultural experience.

But perhaps Jazz's best exponents are still the Americans, partly because the music was developed there^{1st}, and partly because one of the most important elements of a successful Jazz musician is his or her ability to develop their own unique style of playing. This means freedom, individualism, striking out on one's own and blazing a path where there was none before. These are characteristics familiar to Americans. Our forefathers founded the country on these principals and we were taught from childhood to value the importance of the individual and to voice our own opinions. This is somewhat in contrast to Asian societies developed out of say, a Confucian model, where the importance is on following the rules of one's elders and society as a whole rather than it's individual parts.

Of course the world is becoming a smaller place, in the sense that more and more we, from different countries and cultures, are sharing our beliefs, experiences, and music. Over time our styles fuse and meld, we use a drum pattern from Africa, a rythmn from India, a new harmonic idea from America, and use a pentatonic scale from Japan in a new way, etc... In an age of communication and information, there are far fewer boundaries in music and culture.

However, it can still be said that generally speaking, Asians have a more difficult time developing their own styles as Jazz musicians than the Americans, and that Jazz music is still more popular in America. The primary emphasis in Asia is still on commerce and not on the Arts. Many Singaporeans are chasing the 5 c's (cash, credit card, condo, car, career), and their society does have not an artistic culture to draw from. Also the emphasis in education here is on formal "book learning" in an intellectual way, as opposed to first hand, emotional, life experience. It is important to recognize that only recently has Jazz been taught in the universities, and even now with so many colleges offering Jazz degrees, as a Jazz performer it is your playing *experience* that matters most, not whether you have a college degree.

There is an outstanding authentic sounding Salsa Band made up of all Japanese musicians. They are world famous. When the singers perform onstage they sing in perfect Spanish, yet, offstage they can't speak conversational Spanish at all! This is an example of how Asians have

become so marvelously adept at copying what they hear. But developing unique stylists' among Asian Jazz musicians has proved more elusive, and the swing feel and creative improvisation of Jazz is difficult to emulate.

As more Arts radio, Arts TV, and Jazz educational programs develop in Asia, and as more American Jazz musicians come to Asia to play and teach, Jazz and the Arts will grow in Asia and there will be more fusion of artistic cultures, to the benefit of all.

I think most people are surprised at how good the music scene is in Singapore, though I believe it was even better a five years ago when I first arrived. For example, just 4 years ago, in addition to the places which still exist, there was Jeremy's Jazz and Blues Club which occasionally presented international jazz stars, The Don Gomes Jazz Trio entertained at The Regent Bar, Louis Soliano led a jazz quartet at The Oriental, and the Pan Pacific Hotel also had a jazz band from New York. Now of those four places, only one has music, The Regent Bar, and it's *not* Jazz music. Furthermore, Jeremy Montiero, Singapore's own famous jazz musician, does not have his Jazz Club anymore; pianist bandleader Don Gomes has moved to Australia; The Oriental, Singapore has recently canned *all* live music; Louis Soliano, Singapore's other famous jazz bandleader no longer plays jazz regularly; and the Pan Pacific, Singapore no longer favors jazz at all. Other hotels in Singapore which used to feature jazz occasionally but no longer do as far as I can tell, include The Four Seasons, The Ritz-Carlton, The InterContinental, and the Hyatt Regency. Perhaps the biggest loss on the local music scene is the closing of The Saxophone Bar, where American maestro O'Donal Levy used to play. He was a great performer, but he is currently living in New York City. Now, the Singaporean Jazz scene is alive largely due to the American expat musicians who are playing jazz here, and the few local musicians who have bucked the trend of commercialism, and decided to focus on Jazz. Together, locals and expats, form a small but active Jazz community here.

There seem to be more Jazz concerts presented outdoors and free to the public in the past two years. Hopefully this is the beginning of a new trend to present more Jazz in Singapore. This writer for one, will be striving to help accomplish just that. My company Chako Productions Pte Ltd, working with Chijmes Investments, recently presented a series of 7 monthly Jazz concerts, free, outdoors at Chijmes. This concert series featured groups who don't have the opportunity to play as a unit anywhere else, and hence, new Jazz music was heard for the first time in Singapore. The National Council of the Arts has presented free Jazz Concerts in the Park, though sadly, not all of the concerts feature professional Jazz musicians, and few authentic Jazz players from abroad are involved. I believe there is still a lot that needs to be done in terms of education and awareness, before we can expect to see in Singapore the high level of quality music presentation common in America and Europe.

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