



Tula's Restaurant & Jazz Club

Seattle's local jazz mainstay keeps that authentic club feeling

By Gregory Brusstar

Maybe there aren't many genuine old-style jazz clubs left – those dark, narrow, sonorous, swingin' venues tucked between two well-lit places. Tula's Restaurant & Jazz Club in Belltown is one of them.

For nearly two decades, Tula's has featured local and regional jazz musicians seven nights a week. Their niche is not national jazz theater with hefty ticket prices. Nor is it primarily a restaurant with an order of jazz on the side. Tula's serves a large order of primo regional jazz talent at a reasonable price, with good food and booze to enhance the experience.

The club has its regular customers, and national and international renown. Travelers from Japan, France, Germany and Canada regularly call in advance to save a seat during their stay. The club features in *DownBeat's* guide to the world's "150 Great Jazz Rooms," and Wynton Marsalis lists Tula's among his top-ten national clubs, for *USA Today*: "This is a cool place," he says.

On weekends, Tula's typically features combos, some with vocalists. This month includes Greta Matassa Quartet, Jay Thomas Quartet, Wellstone Conspiracy, Ian Hendrickson-Smith Quartet, the Jacqueline Tabor Jazz Band, Stephanie Porter Quartet and Susan Pascal Quartet.

A buoyant big band schedule – Jim Cutler Jazz Orchestra, the Jazz Police, Roadside Attraction, Dave Marriott Big Band, Fairly Honest Jazz Band, Jay Thomas Big Band, Smith/Staelens Big Band, Emerald City Jazz Orches-

tra, Easy Street Band, Music Works Big Band – is one prerogative of Elliott "Mack" Waldron, the self-deprecating, low-key, humorous owner of Tula's. The retired Navy bandleader used to play trombone and often books big

education system here, and I hope they don't do away with band programs." He invites high-school bandleaders to bring their bands to the club.

Waldron began his association with jazz music in his youth. He played in



ELLIOTT "MACK" WALDRON WITH JASON AND SHERRILL MOORE. PHOTO BY DANIEL SHEEHAN.

bands during the week, but Waldron would never come out and tell you he was an instrumentalist. I asked if he still played in a band:

"I wouldn't do that to anybody," he says. "Only in the basement, in the dark, by myself. I'm over-stocked with instruments and under-stocked with talent."

As such, he's a supporter of music education, and education in general (both of his kids have PhDs). "Seattle has a wealth of good high-school band directors and music teachers," he says. "The parents are also very supportive of music education. We have a wonderful

his high-school jazz band in Kilgore, Texas, and continued to play when he attended Kilgore Junior College.

The Vietnam War was raging at the time, so he enlisted in the Navy and joined the band, eventually becoming a bandleader. He ended up making a career of the Navy, staying for 26 years. When he retired, he was stationed at Sand Point Naval Base on Lake Washington.

After the Navy, Waldron and his wife Tula decided to stay in Seattle, her hometown. He worked booking musical acts for a while and then decided to take the plunge into business.

"It had always been my dream to own a jazz club," Waldron says, clearing his throat and frowning ironically. "You should be careful what you ask for, because you might get it."

He soon learned, he says, that jazz clubs are notoriously difficult to run

A rendition of Jobim's "Wave," the fluid 1967 standard, brings out the best in each musician's solo and captivates the audience. Milo Petersen is smooth as silk on guitar; Randy Halberstadt, technically brilliant on piano; Jeff Johnson, awesome on bass;

of Sherrill and Jason Moore, a young couple who moved last year from Florida to Belltown. Tonight, Jason tends bar during the performance and Sherrill waits tables. In Florida, the couple worked at Heidi's Jazz Club in Cocoa Beach, where Jason also managed.

At Tula's, they've focused some recent efforts on building a social media presence and making cosmetic upgrades. Framed posters of jazz greats – Coltrane, Miles, Monk, Mingus, Blakey, Gillespie – hang on freshly painted red brick walls; fresh, white linens cover dining tables, and a new black curtain hangs upstage. The room for about 100 people feels big, with additional stage-viewing mirrors, but you're never far from the flood-lit stage. The club also now has a quality Gretsch Catalina kit and a 15-inch SWR combo bass amp. Coincidentally (or not?), both husband and wife once played the trombone, Waldron's favorite horn.

Waldron, who celebrated his 70th birthday last year, is beginning to

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– Mack Waldron

profitably. "You have to be in it for the love of it," he says, "or honestly, you'd be better off driving a garbage truck."

Waldron enumerates some of the difficulties: the customer base for jazz music is limited. Business drops off with any weather fluctuation. If the weather is good, people want to be outdoors; if it's too rainy or cold, people stay home. And a proliferation of summer jazz festivals siphons business away, too. For revenue, you've got to find the right balance of food and drink prices, cover charge, staffing level and musician fees so that you don't go broke.

and Mark Ivester's hands float effortlessly over the drums.

Drummer Mark Ivester walks by afterward, and I say he looked like he was enjoying himself (he plays with an easy smile). "This is a good environment," Ivester says. "You can really express yourself here."

For dinner, I ordered moussaka, a kind of Greek eggplant-lasagna topped with a layer of thick bechamel. My wife ordered gnocchi, potato dumplings, with Italian sausage and a glass of Washington chardonnay. Our

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On a Friday night at Tula's with my wife, we listen to tenor saxophonist Anton Schwartz and his quintet. This five-man combo of big regional names comes with huge talent and experience – Randy Halberstadt on piano, Milo Petersen on guitar, Mark Ivester on drums and Jeff Johnson on bass. Schwartz says this group is his first effort as bandleader since moving with his wife two years ago from San Francisco to West Seattle. (Schwartz organizes regular Loft Concerts, as he calls them, in both his West Seattle and San Francisco homes, with performances by different musicians. Tickets can be purchased through antonjazz.com.) He starts out the band with some bluesy, energetic originals from his CD *Radiant Blue*. They also play Wes Montgomery, Antonio Carlos Jobim and McCoy Tyner.

entrees and the basket of garlic bread were delightful.

Most of the menu items are Greek or Italian, reasonably priced, between \$16 and \$24. Choose a sandwich wrap or a burger for less expensive options. The wine list consists of mostly regional and California wines. Several excellent local beers (\$5) are offered on tap: Roger's Pilsner, Manny's Pale Ale and Lucille IPA, from Seattle's Georgetown Brewery, and African Amber, from Redmond's Mack and Jack's. You can order a cocktail (\$10) named after a jazz icon, or choose from an array of tort-like desserts to top off your dinner. We shared the tiramisu with coffee. Fantastic.

Serving our table is the better half of the new Tula's management team

ponder retirement. The Moores are positioned to take over the business when Mack retires. "We're proud to be continuing the club's longstanding tradition of providing the very best of local jazz, accompanied with excellent food and service," Jason says in April's *Seattle Jazz Scene* newspaper.

Waldron's take on the state of jazz, as a jazz club owner spanning two decades, is resolutely optimistic: "Some people talk about the heyday of jazz as if it's over," he says, "but it's what it's always been. The jazz community here is very supportive."

"You see twenty-something couples here along with the older couples. We have new customers coming up. Jazz is also entertainment. There always seems to be room for entertainment."