

# ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



## BIRDLAND

[This is the thirty-fifth article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Of all our jazz meccas in the USA, such as Chicago's Jazz Showcase or The Blue Note, New Orleans' Preservation Hall, even Cleveland's Modern Jazz Room, none had the popularity with both musicians and their audiences like New York City's *Birdland*.

During the Roaring 20s, Chicago was home to most of the famous jazz bands at the time. But before Prohibition ended in the early 30s, several of the jazz giants migrated to New York City. Many theories abound: Chicago's gangster climate, speakeasies where band members were not exactly treated with respect, better opportunities in NYC, and so on. Almost every jazz style, as it evolved, from the hot jazz of the early 30s to big band swing in the 30s and 40s to bebop in the late 40s, got its start in New York City. The bands played in Harlem in the Cotton Club, and uptown in places like The Onyx Club, The Three Deuces, Jimmy Ryan's, and The Famous Door. Many opportunities, yet Jazz was still looking for its Center of Gravity, a permanent home.

In 1949, the Levy brothers and Oscar Goodstein bought a nightclub, purportedly from crime boss Joseph Catalano, located at 1678 Broadway, downstairs below street level. It reopened on December 15, 1949, and featured the "who's who" of Jazz, featuring Max Kaminsky, Hot Lips Page, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Stan Getz and Lennie Tristano. Capitalizing on Parker's popularity, the owners dubbed their place *Birdland* (refer to last month's article on Charlie Parker, where I covered the derivation of his nickname – "Bird").

The patrons would descend the stairs and find the band right in front, with the left side containing a long bar and rows of chairs on both sides of the room reserved for serious listeners. The area was dubbed the Bullpen or Peanut Gallery. In the middle were a dozen or so tables with red and white checkered tablecloths, where they could order food and drink. Known as The Jazz Corner of the World, *Birdland* was rather cozy (read: small), seating only about 400. But over the next 5 years, it packed them in, collecting the \$1.50 cover charge from nearly 1.5 million Jazz aficionados, who were treated to almost every musician of note, including Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Art Tatum, and George Shearing (whose composition *Lullaby of Birdland* was recorded live at the club by Count Basie). One of the club's little quirks

(and I do mean little) involved the Master of Ceremonies named Pee Wee Marquette, all of four feet tall if he stood on tip-toes. If the musicians didn't tip him, he'd mispronounce their names. Horace Silver, for example, became *Hore Ass Silber!*



The “in” scene also attracted the “in crowd,” notably Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner, Marilyn Monroe, Gary Cooper, Joe Louis and Sugar Ray Robinson, Judy Garland and others. The owners had a winning formula: double- or triple-bill the music headliners and start the festivities at 9PM, often closing just before dawn. The crowds loved it. As other Jazz night clubs were dying off, with Rock ‘n Roll pushing the genre aside, *Birdland* persisted – at least until 1964. In June, with crowds thinning and major stars opting to go on tour, the owners filed Chapter 11 bankruptcy, eventually closing their doors in 1965. After providing over 15 years of all-nighters to its fans, *Birdland* needed a nap. A long nap!

Like Rip Van Winkle, *Birdland* awoke about 20 years later, this time uptown on Broadway at 105<sup>th</sup> Street, with over 2,000 emerging artists performing over the next 10 years. But owner John Valenti felt the club needed to return to its roots – in midtown Manhattan. So in 1996, the third iteration of *Birdland* opened at 315 West 44<sup>th</sup> Street in Midtown. It featured a larger space, great acoustics and sight lines, and a much-improved food menu. Hosting some of the best Jazz on earth, notables like Dave Brubeck, Oscar Peterson, Diana Krall, John Pizzarelli, Clark Terry, even the Big Band of Tito Puente graced the *Birdland* stage. Interestingly, one Ravi Coltrane, son of John Coltrane (who I'll profile next month) was among these stars. The saxophonist was not yet 2 years old when his father died, but the genes are obvious. Ravi has played with many of the best in the business.

*Birdland* hosts popular music events such as the Umbria Jazz festival in NYCX and the Annual Django Reinhardt NY Festival. Inflation has pushed current prices up to a \$20 - \$50 cover, depending on the star and the seat location, with a \$10 food and drink minimum, still pretty inexpensive by New York City standards. Check out [www.birdlandjazz.com](http://www.birdlandjazz.com) for current schedules. It's a great website for a great legendary Jazz venue.

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as “Just Me 2”, a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at [www.JustMeLiveMusic.com](http://www.JustMeLiveMusic.com). See them on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic](http://www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic)