



Writing Sample

WHERE'S THE JAZZ? CALGARY'S JAZZ SCENE IS ON LIFE SUPPORT

The following arts story was published by the Calgary Journal and Notice Magazine in 2014.

BY JESSE YARDLEY

The Calgary jazz music scene has suffered a series of setbacks since 2010 when the city's annual jazz festival was cancelled. Since then, the jazz scene continued to flounder with Mount Royal University mothballing its jazz program and the city's most well known jazz club, Beat Niq, closing its doors.

Kevin Shredder, entertainment coordinator and owner of Oiltown Entertainment says the closures have been very disappointing. Shredder is a saxophone player and a graduate of Mount Royal University's jazz program, back when the institution was still a college. He thinks Calgary can improve its jazz scene and hopes for a resurgence.

"You don't know what you've got until it's gone," Shredder says. "These types of things, with this type of loss, [it] can make people search out for more."

Shredder has been working as a contractor to Downtown Calgary, bringing talented musicians to the streets of Calgary as part of its #IAMDOWNTOWN initiative.

Downtown Calgary operates under the legal entity of the Calgary Downtown Association (CDA) and funds the musical acts with monies collected from taxes paid by downtown businesses.

Shredder says over the course of 2014 he has hired a variety of acts including talented jazz performers like Ellen Doty, Sheldon Zandboer, Prime Time Big Band and, most recently, Cheryl Fisher.

Fisher, an award winning jazz vocalist, thinks Calgarians would be more inclined to seek out jazz venues if they were exposed to the genre more often.



Cheryl Fisher, a musical artist with five albums under her belt, says she's happy to be back on stage in Calgary.

On September 20, Fisher performed a mix of covers and original music for lucky passersby on Stephen Avenue. She sees public performances as a way to entertain listeners but also as a means to educate people about the unique complexity of the genre.

"It's composition on the fly. You know, that's what improvisation is. And, that's why I love it. It's 'cause it's a challenge. I never know what's going to come out of them and what I'm going to react to. And so I change with every instrument, it's like, you know, I've said this before: You can never make the same fire twice," Fisher says.

Eric Allison is Fisher's husband and a recent inductee to the South Florida Jazz Hall of Fame. He says jazz is so diverse that it can throw people off at first.

“So you have New Orleans, Dixieland, you’ve got swing, you’ve got bebop, you’ve got cool jazz, you’ve got fusion, you’ve got avant-garde, you have all these different styles and they’re all jazz. And so a lot of people, when they hear the word jazz, they just automatically say, oh I don’t like that,” Allison says.



Musician Keith Smith demonstrates his prowess with the guitar.

Allison says when people who haven’t had much exposure to live jazz hear the music they say, “Hey, this is great! This is jazz?!”

Zhenia Iskra and her boyfriend Kambiz Jahromi just happened to be walking by when Fisher and her band were setting up to perform. They say they both like jazz but had no idea there was a free concert going on.

“I think the marketing is what hinders it. People don’t know what’s going on in Calgary and maybe that’s why people haven’t been exposed to jazz and don’t grow to like it,” Iskra says.

One group dedicated to getting the word out about jazz is the volunteer-based organization JazzYYC.

Kodi Hutchinson, artistic director and board member at JazzYYC, says the organization acts as consolidated voice for local jazz musicians as well as a presenter and organizer of jazz events.

“We present eight concerts a year in our Illumin8 concert series and we’re going to be running two separate jazz festivals, one this November, the JazzYYC Canadian jazz festival, and then next year we will be launching our inaugural summer jazz festival in June.”

Although the Calgary jazz scene has faced some setbacks, there are still many ardent fans and supporters of jazz. Hutchinson says jazz fans are looking for organizations that they can depend on and will “be here for the long haul.”

Hutchinson is about as tapped into the jazz scene as one can get. He runs his own musical group, the Hutchinson Andrew Trio, is the Saturday host of Time for Jazz on CKUA radio and his record label, Chronograph Records was recently nominated by Western Canadian Music Awards for outstanding label of the year.

Hutchinson says when Beat Niq closed and the jazz festival collapsed “it really left a gap in the city where fans of the jazz scene were like, where do we go, what do we do, because there’s nowhere to go. But fortunately what’s happening now is that things are starting to pop up.”

Hutchinson points to Friday nights at Lolita’s and the Cliff Bungalow Jazz Series, which runs the first Wednesday of every month, as signs that jazz is still going strong in Calgary.

“They are very grass roots, presenting only Calgary artists and they sell out every single show,” he says.

Hutchinson and Fisher both see jazz making a comeback in Calgary because of strong support by the public and key organizations who help promote the art.



Bassist John Gray, founder of the Ray Charles Tribute Orchestra, sets down a toe-tapping bass line for a crowd of listeners on Stephen Avenue.

“Thank heavens for CBC and CKUA and those radio stations that still soldier on with making diversity of music one of their strong mandates,” Fisher says.

Yet the future of jazz in Calgary is by no means guaranteed. Public support is nice to have, but the struggle to fund arts and culture is an ongoing challenge.

“Being in the arts, whether you’re a performing musician, or a visual artist or a dancer, or any of the classical, you know an orchestra member, it’s always an uphill struggle,” Allison says, adding, “You’re always trying to get the municipalities, the province, the country, the governments to invest more in arts because it just adds to the quality of life in the communities. And it’s proven in surveys and studies, time after time, that it also benefits the economy greatly and benefits the quality of life.”