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ARTS; Sleepy Jazz Scene Shows Signs of Awakening

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PHOTO: Marcus Shelby at the club Yoshi's in Oakland, sister to the San Francisco Yoshi's. The San Francisco jazz scene is reviving. (PHOTOGRAPH BY SCOTT CHERNIS)

A recent Sunday afternoon jazz matinee at Café Royale was a sleepy affair. About 15 people, most of them middle-aged, sat around this ramshackle downtown San Francisco bar sipping tea and wine while a saxophone, drum and bass trio played a mellow mixture of mostly standards. The noise of rustling bags of pistachios and yogurt-covered pretzels, which several audience members had taken along for snacks, accompanied the polite applause at the end of each number. Anyone who stopped by the Café Royale that afternoon to take the pulse of the local jazz scene would have reason to declare it faint.

Clichés about jazz's being a dying art form -- the province of a generation reminiscing about the "good old days" of smoky clubs in the Fillmore district and North Beach -- linger in the Bay Area. And, as is the case elsewhere around the country, the local jazz vista isn't what it once was.

"San Francisco still has some tremendous musicians," said Ken Bullock, who runs the monthly jazz matinee at Café Royale. "But for decades, the city hasn't been a great place for them to have a real public face."

Yet the city's most visible presenter of the genre, SFJazz (which oversees

the annual San Francisco Jazz Festival, among other events), coupled with a simmering -- if not quite bubbling -- underground scene, is working to keep jazz alive. And things may be looking up: SFJazz recently announced plans to build a 35,000-square-foot jazz performance and education center in Hayes Valley.

Since its founding in 1983, SFJazz has been a nomadic organization, presenting shows in places like the Herbst Theater, Davies Symphony Hall and the Masonic Center. Since 2004 it has developed its own successful band, the SFJazz Collective, whose members have included Joshua Redman, Dave Douglas, Joe Lovano and Nicholas Payton.

The SFJazz Center, scheduled to break ground next year and to open in fall 2012, will be home to most of the organization's concerts. The building, designed by Mark Cavagnero Associates Architects, will include a 700-seat auditorium with a thrust stage and a multi-use black-box space, as well as rehearsal and recording facilities and a cafe.

The local jazz world is excited. "The new center will bring a lot of focus to the scene," said Marcus Shelby, the renowned Bay Area bassist and bandleader. "It will also help jazz gain the same level of respect around here that classical music does."

The decision to build the center near most of the city's cultural institutions, including the San Francisco Symphony, Ballet and Opera, and the Herbst Theater, is a canny move. The location could raise SFJazz's profile among the wealthy arts patrons who frequent the area. According to SFJazz, which is nonprofit, it earns around 60 percent of its budget from ticket sales and about 40 percent from contributions. An anonymous \$20 million donation kicked off the construction of the building.

In addition, the Hayes Valley location may allow the center to develop its

own identity, away from the Fillmore district, the city's designated "jazz heritage" area. This isn't a bad result, considering the Fillmore's somewhat Disneyfied atmosphere these days. Hailed as the "Harlem of the West" from the 1930s to 1950s, the neighborhood had nightspots hosting performances by luminaries like Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker and John Coltrane.

But urban redevelopment in the 1960s closed most of the clubs and drove away many of the musicians. The influx in recent years of jazz clubs like Rasselas and Yoshi's, (the sister club of the Yoshi's in Oakland), as well as cultural organizations like the San Francisco Jazz Heritage Center, have somewhat revived the neighborhood's musical traditions. But the shiny-looking upscale facades and interiors lack intimacy.

The creation of a unified hub for jazz in San Francisco will certainly create better brand recognition for SFJazz, but it also has the potential to generate a more diverse community of artists. Because the new center will be more accessible by public transportation than it would be in, say, North Beach, people might visit in greater numbers. Audiences will have a choice among large-scale auditorium concerts, workshops and intimate recitals, or simply hanging out in the cafe. The educational component may also draw in younger musicians (including those from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music).

A new generation of presenters is also gradually helping to cultivate younger audiences. Local impresarios, like Adam Theis, the founder of Jazz Mafia, a loose musical collective, are producing soirees that are proving popular among young audiences. An unannounced tribute to Stevie Wonder and James Brown at the Coda Lounge last Tuesday featured a 20-piece band, five singers and three rappers and attracted a capacity audience of 150.

"The Bay Area has always been one of the top places in the country for jazz musicians," Mr. Theis said. "But the scene these days is happening mostly underground."

"Hotplate," SFJazz's monthly concert series at the Amnesia, a hip Mission

club, asks local artists and groups like Joe Bagale, Wil Blades and Le Jazz Hot to reinterpret the work of jazz greats, including Sun Ra, Jimmy Smith and Django Reinhardt. These casual and lively events, which have sold out each month since the series began last September, are packed with people in their 20s and 30s.

By forging organizational partnerships, focusing on younger crowds and looking beyond traditional definitions of the art form to include jazz-influenced genres like soul, blues and funk, the scene may well survive and even flourish.

San Francisco clubs include Rasselas, at 1534 Fillmore Street, (415) 346-8696, and Yoshi's at 1330 Fillmore Street, (415) 655-5600.

Correction: May 23, 2010, Sunday

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction: An article last Sunday about the local jazz scene in San Francisco misidentified one of the jazz venues. It is Amnesia, not Amnesia Lounge.

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