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PERFORMING ARTS

SFJazz to jam in its own new digs

By Jesse Hamlin

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

SFJazz will build itself a permanent home in San Francisco — the first stand-alone major facility in the country devoted to the swinging American art form.

The nonprofit organization unveils plans today for the SFJazz Center, a three-story, 35,000-square-foot glass, steel and concrete structure that will rise at the corner of Fell and Franklin streets in bustling Hayes Valley, just down the street from Davies Symphony Hall and the Opera House. The auto-repair center on the site will be torn down.

“Our goal is to create a vibrant home for jazz, an environment where the music can grow and develop in the future,” says Randall Kline, SFJazz’s founder and executive artistic director.

For the last 28 years, SFJazz — a year-round presenting organization that produces the



Mark Cavagnero Associates

San Francisco Jazz Festival, commissions new music and runs educational programs — has put on shows in rented theaters, clubs and concert halls around town. Now, it will have its own performance space created specifically for jazz.

Designed by San Francisco’s

Mark Cavagnero Associates Architects, the \$60 million SFJazz Center will feature a theater that can seat up to 700 people. An 80-seat Ensemble Room will be used for smaller performances, rehearsals, classes and lectures.

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An artist’s rendering shows the 700-seat theater envisioned for the SFJazz Center.

SFJazz to settle down

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The building, expected to open in 2012, will also house offices, practice rooms, a digital lab for arranging music and mixing sound, and a café and restaurant where people can hang out all day and after performances.

High visibility

The lobbies and other public spaces will be visible from the street, so that people walking or driving by will get a sense of "the energy and excitement of what's going on inside," says Cavagnero, who designed the recent renovation at the Oakland

Museum.

The only other jazz organization in the country with a permanent home is New York's Jazz at Lincoln Center. In 2004, it opened the 100,000-square-foot Frederick P. Rose Hall on the fifth floor of the Time Warner Center at the southwest corner of Central Park.

The SFJazz Center will be more modest in scale, but no less ambitious in its vision to present the diverse spectrum of jazz in a first-rate facility. The organization has already raised half the money for the project, which is scheduled to begin construction next year. SFJazz board

members contributed \$10 million, and \$20 million came from a San Francisco jazz lover who asked for anonymity.

"This building is a very big deal," says Kary Schulman, director of the city's Grants for the Arts, which helped get SFJazz, then called Jazz in the City, off the ground in 1983 with a \$10,000 grant.

"Having your own building is huge. It gives you an identity and a sense of permanence."

Adrian Ellis, the director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, agrees.

"It's a great thing for San Francisco, which is a fantastic jazz city," Ellis says. "To have a permanent, dedicated space for jazz acknowledges and underscores the long-term significance of the music."

Long S.F. history

Jazz has flourished in San Francisco since the early 1900s, when the saloons and dance halls on the vice-filled Barbary Coast jumped to the sounds of ragtime and blues. The New Orleans cornetist Bunk Johnson, a key figure in the New Orleans jazz revival centered in San Francisco in the early 1940s, first played here in 1905.

The great swing and bop musicians played the many black-owned clubs and after-hours joints that thrived in the Fillmore district in the 1940s and '50s. A slew of renowned San Francisco clubs have come and gone over the years, among them Jimbo's Bob City, the Blackhawk, the Jazz Workshop and Keystone Korner. These days, the major club on the scene is Yoshi's, which has branches in Oakland and a 3-year-old club on a revitalized strip of San Francisco's Fillmore Street.

Kline and his SFJazz colleagues scouted out neighborhoods all over



Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Randall Kline, SFJazz's founder, stands in front of the site of the organization's future home.

to the community and to the street," he said. "Part of the vision was for this place to be a community center, a space that encompasses that inclusive and welcoming feeling of jazz."

Kline envisioned a theater that would have the intimacy and energy of a club like New York's venerable Village Vanguard. That was one of the places that he, Cavagnero and San Francisco-based theater designer Len Auerbach, who worked on the project, visited while conceptualizing the design. Another was Carnegie Hall's 599-seat Zankel Hall, which Auerbach worked on.

Kline also talked to a lot of musicians about the venues they loved and why. Saxophonist Joe Lovano, a former member of the SFJazz Collective, raved about the Roman amphitheater in Vienne, France, where, as Lovano put it, "you're looking into the eyes of the audience, rather than down at them."

That's what will happen in the steeply raked SFJazz Center theater, where the audience will surround the musicians.

Healthy competition

"SFJazz hopes to grow that community with the new building, where it will produce 90 percent of its shows. It will still use Davies Hall for big stars with big fees, but will no longer rent Herbst Theatre. Kline plans to put on four performances a week in the new venue, raising the total number of concerts from 100 a year to

healthy competition, but we want them to succeed," says Jason Olaine, who books Yoshi's San Francisco. "A more successful SFJazz shines a light on jazz in the Bay Area. I'd like to think we can all coexist without anybody having their

nose bloodied."

Bobby Hutcherson, the venerated Bay Area-based vibraphonist who is one of the greatest improvisers in jazz, thinks it's about time the music got a home of its own.

"It's an important symbol," Hutcherson says. "It puts the music in the perspective it deserves, brings it more respect. When people think about jazz, they won't think about those smoky cellar nightclubs. It's going to be exciting. I wish all those musicians who've passed away, who lived through all those venues in San Francisco, could see what's going on."

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