Jazz de Opus

One of the definitive nightclubs in the Portland jazz scene, Jazz de Opus presented touring jazz legends as well as many area performers from 1972 until it closed in 2003. During that time, the club, with space for fewer than 100 patrons, became a cultural nexus that reflected changing social and economic conditions. It was known around the country as the Oregon version of the Village Vanguard, the fabled New York club, and it contributed to Portland's reputation as a thriving jazz city. Located in Portland's Old Town neighborhood at 33 N.W. 2nd Avenue, the club closed, said then-owner Gus Samander (who purchased the business in 1999) in a 2003 interview, because of declining audiences.

"It was the quintessential jazz club," said bandleader Alan Jones in a 2007 interview. "It looked and felt like a jazz club; it had a reputation as the place to play. I saw Dexter Gordon there when I was in high school," recalled Jones, who sneaked in an upstairs window to hear the legendary saxophonist.

Original owner Sam Pshue was a jazz lover who hired musicians to finish the space with natural wood, dark paneling, beanbag chairs, and fire pits. The walls were soon lined with autographed photos of such jazz figures as Art Balkey, Milt Jackson, and Earl Hines.

Over the years, the décor changed with the times, and nationally touring artists were replaced by prominent Portland-based musicians who found a home there, including guitarist Dan Balmer, vocalist Nancy King, bassist Leroy Vinnegar, and the Alan Jones Sextet, which drew large crowds of young listeners for several years in the 1990s. It was one of the few clubs to offer a guaranteed performance fee, regular weekly engagements, and complete musical freedom.

Written by Lynn Darroch

Further Reading:

Darroch, Lynn. "Jazz de Opus closes." *Oregonian*, Artsweek section, Sept. 7, 2003.

Samander, Gus. Interview with the author, August, 2003.

Copyright © 2008-2013 Portland State University