

Jazz musician has yet to bounce rent cheque

Jazz is alive and well in Edmonton

by John Watson

Forty hours a week is a standard full-time job. It is also the amount of time Marc Vasey often spends volunteering for the Edmonton Jazz Society.

In his position Vasey arranges for performers and deals with the day to day operation of the Society and its venue "The Yardbird Suite." He has been with the Society since its inception in 1973, when he and a number of other people started it "with the hope that the money would just start rolling in."

They had been involved promoting jazz in the city since 1969 and "losing money all the time," Vasey said.

"Our concept then, as it still is, is to provide the best local, national and international jazz music to the citizens of Edmonton."

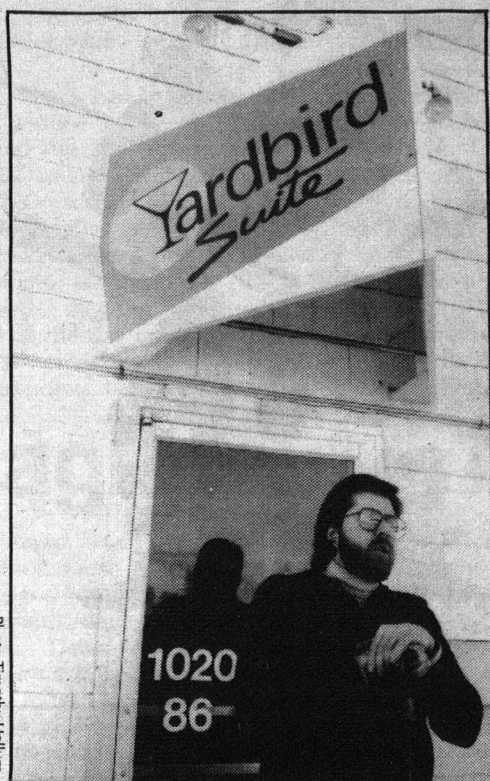
The founders of the Society were ambitious. Plans in '73 called for a club before '74 and a jazz festival that summer. The first Jazz City festival didn't happen until 1980, (and it isn't a Jazz Society show.) And it wasn't until 1984 that the Society moved into what it hopes will be its permanent home — The Yardbird Suite.

The Suite opened as a "full-time jazz club" Sept./84 and has been open ever since," said Vasey. Initially they were open only on weekends. They would only get one night beer and wine licenses. But by December of that year the suite had been renovated to the point the ALCB granted a full time license.

The Suite now operates as a private club for members and guests only. A situation Vasey calls "barely financially possible." Volunteers are what keep the Suite running. "The only people who have been paid in the last year are the dishwashers," and the musicians of course.

The Suite will have a budget of about \$200,000 this year. The majority of this goes to pay the musicians. Advertising is the second most expensive item on the list. International artists though, really hurt the budget. "We have to buy U.S. artists to stay alive and it costs us so much money because our dollar isn't worth anything," said Vasey.

Most of the money now comes from ticket



Jazz aficionado, Marc Vasey

sales but the Society gets some financial support from Alberta culture, support they couldn't get in the early years. "they thought we'd disappear in six months," said Vasey, but we didn't and support is now pretty good.

Alberta has "programs that virtually no other province in Canada has for culture, its one of the reasons we're able to survive," said Vasey. Jazz needs that kind of support to be able to survive in Edmonton. It, like the symphony or the ballet, is not a profit making venture "by any stretch of the imagination."

The Society not only caters to fans of jazz music, but to its players as well. "We are trying to create not only on the part of the fan, but of the musicians as well, that there is some hope." With the support of the Jazz Society an eight piece band has been put



Jazz musician Sean MacNally

together by Edmonton musician Sean MacNally. The Edmonton Jazz Ensemble will be featured regularly at the Yardbird Suite.

A new feature at the Suite will be a blues band the third week of every month. February will see Chicago Pete and the Detroiters. "Just to provide a little different flavour to the place," Vasey said.

Meanwhile the Society is still working hard at staying above water. They are determined to keep the only venue in the city for contemporary jazz open. And they are "slowly convincing the powers that be that this thing should be supported."

★★★★

by John Watson

Jazz musicians in Edmonton cannot live off of their art alone. Sean MacNally is a well

known Edmonton musician who is well aware of the restrictions on his trade. He has worked with many of the major Edmonton acts including Gay Delorme and Tommy Banks.

MacNally's first choice is to play jazz but in Edmonton there isn't a lot of opportunity to do that. "I'll play my music when I can, and it will always come first when I have the choice, but if somebody wants me to come out and wants to pay me than its also an opportunity to hone my craft." Freelancing may not be the most dependable source of income, but MacNally has made a living off of it for about three years.

He started playing music in high school on a guitar his brother found in the garbage. From high school he went on to Grant MacEwan and from there he started getting work.

"I moved away from home to prove to myself that I could do it on my own," MacNally said. That was three years ago, and he has yet to bounce the rent cheque.

"There are a lot of musicians in this city who make their living playing music, some of them, of which I am one, also play jazz when they can."

In fact there was almost no opportunity to play jazz in Edmonton until recently. The Edmonton Jazz Society asked MacNally to organize a jazz band. He did. The Edmonton Jazz Ensemble is an eight piece band MacNally is very pleased with. Four horns and four rhythm players will be playing original compositions and a lot of contemporary music at the Yardbird Suite one weekend a month.

Though MacNally stresses that the band is not under his control to any great degree his music is part of what the band will be playing. "The only thing to count on is my style, and I don't know what that is, so that's a little bit of a side step," he said.

"That's great, now we're playing jazz in Alberta, but that is still not going to pay the rent." What it is, is an opportunity for Edmonton artists to play the music they want to play.

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