



jazz is hot
again

by David Brent Johnson

photography by Cliff Doerzbacher



JAZZ. For some people the word calls to mind a 1950's film noir soundtrack or the cool sound of a sexy late-night radio program. For others, jazz is a somewhat moribund art form that had its heyday before rock music came of age. But look around the city of Bloomington and you'll see how America's most original musical treasure is flourishing in the 21st century.



Above: Hoagy Carmichael
Right: Dominic Spera, a natural showman in the mold of Louis Prima. photograph by Tom Sito

Jazz in Bloomington is the Stardusters Orchestra swinging everything from the classics to 1970's disco while dancers take to the floor. It's trumpeter Dominic Spera leading a crack lineup of Indiana University faculty musicians through a set of jazz standards before an adoring crowd of older Bloomingtonians. It's the avant-garde Saxophone Cartel negotiating the limits of sound while recording a new CD in front of a downtown loft audience. It is trumpeter Pat Harbison playing at the Malibu

night he wrote the song. Mythical or not (Carmichael biographer Richard Sudhalter says the song was composed over the course of several different sittings), the creation of "Stardust" is a key early chapter in the story of Bloomington jazz.

That story dates back at least to the spring of 1924, when a man who would become one of jazz's most mythical figures came to town. He was just 21, a cornet player with a penchant for bootleg liquor and an unvarnished ability to shape sounds of beauty with his horn. His name was Bix Beiderbecke, and throughout that spring he and his band, the Wolverines, played fraternity parties at Indiana University. He also spent a great deal of time with 24-year-old Hoagy Carmichael. As the story goes, they were

Malibu Grill
Jeremy Allen (bass)
Steve Houghton (drums)
Rusty Burge (vibes)
Pat Harbison (trumpet)

"It was a hot night, sweet with the death of summer and the hint and promise of fall," said Carmichael of the night he wrote Stardust.



lying on the floor of Carmichael's frat house one afternoon, somewhat hungover as they listened to Stravinsky's "The Firebird," when Beiderbecke groggily suggested that Carmichael take up songwriting. Thus was

the career of an American legend born. Grill on the Square and enjoying the sophisticated urban vibe so much that he feels as if he "could be playing anywhere in the world." And it is live jazz nearly every night of the week on the streets of a small city with a big-city appreciation for creativity and tradition.

More than 80 years later, the jazz scene in Bloomington is thriving. "When I came back to Bloomington in 1997," says Harbison, a trumpeter and faculty member at the IU School of Music, "you could only find jazz at Bear's Place and the IU campus. Now there are a lot more places featuring jazz, a lot more people are playing off-campus, and the audience is much more diverse. You have everyone from kids trying to get in with fake IDs to the AARP set coming out for Dominic Spera."

These are the same streets that songwriter Hoagy Carmichael walked as a boy, the same skies from which he drew down the breath that returned to us as "Stardust." That song alone is enough to earn Bloomington a place in jazz history with its hundreds of recordings and its uncanny ability to simultaneously evoke youth, nostalgia, and longing. "It was a hot night, sweet with the death of summer and the hint and promise of fall," said Carmichael of the



Spera is a retired IU School of Music professor and a trumpeter-bandleader of longstanding repute in the Bloomington jazz community. On a spring night, he's standing on the crowded, triangular stage in the back room of Bear's Place, leading an octet of IU faculty members and high-profile community musicians. A natural showman, Spera works a neighbor's woes with a tomato garden into a Louis Armstrong-like vocal, provoking much laughter from the audience. Spera introduces an old jazz standard called "Flamingo" with some warm and complimentary jibes at its arranger, saxophonist Tom Walsh, who's on the bandstand with him. Behind him, the coolly self-possessed



Wide Open at Bear's Place
 Julian Bransby (piano)
 Joel Kelsey (bass)
 Dennis Riggins
 (alto and tenor saxophones)
 Dan Deckard (drums)
 Pat Harbison (trumpet)

Luke Gillespie adds occasional musical commentary on his piano. The show ends with a happy confluence of clarinet and brass on "Back Home Again in Indiana."

Spera is playing as part of the Jazz Fables concert series, a Thursday-night tradition launched by trumpeter David Miller in 1989 (the Fables concept itself goes back to 1977). Throughout most of the 1990's it was the one consistent venue for jazz not on the IU campus. Today it's one of more than half-a-dozen regular jazz gigs in town. Miller, who came to Bloomington as a student in 1966, is a key figure in the city's jazz past and present. He advised the Bluebird nightclub when it



David Baker, chair of the jazz department and the rarest of rare, a jazz cellist. photograph by Tom Stio

"These kids are incredibly talented," says IU's David Baker, "and they're much better-informed than the kids of my generation. They now have a mechanism for learning jazz."

drawn here by David Baker, chairman of the jazz department and a revered jazz educator, as important factors in the Jazz Fables' success.

"The wonderful thing for me is that I get to play with all of these great musicians who come to town," says Miller. "A lot of them come back to play, and some of them stay. When I started the Fables at Bear's, two of the band members were graduate students—now they're professors at the School of Music (saxophonist Tom Walsh and pianist Luke Gillespie)."

Harbison attributes much of the increased live-jazz activity to Bloomington's growth as a city. "You have post-midlife people coming here looking for the quality of life, the art

brought national jazz acts such as Charles Mingus here in the 1970's, booked jazz at the Second Story club during the 1980's, and has acted as host, director, and frequent participant at Fables over the past 17 years.

Miller cites Bear's proximity to the IU School of Music (just across the street) and the influx of young players



David Miller playing at Caté Django (trumpet, flugelhorn)

scene, affordable places to live. People are still thinking of Bloomington as a college, aging-hippie town, but now we have upper-middle-class executive types from the East Coast moving here.”

“People think Bloomington is in the middle of a cornfield,” says Baker. “But you can see all these outstanding classical and jazz musicians and when you leave the venue, your car will still be there.”

Baker came back to Bloomington in 1966, after earlier stays for undergraduate and doctoral work, and became a pioneer in the field of jazz education, developing a jazz studies program that’s marking its 40th anniversary this autumn. He’s a product of the glory days of Indianapolis’ Indiana Avenue jazz scene, which produced internationally acclaimed musicians such as J.J. Johnson, Wes

Montgomery, and Freddie Hubbard. If Indiana continues to be a “national road” for emerging jazz musicians, it is largely because of IU’s jazz department, which counts saxophonist Michael Brecker, trumpeters Randy Brecker and Chris Botti, and *Saturday Night Live* band drummer Shawn Pelton among its former students.

That national road is again a two-way thoroughfare, thanks to the efforts of a promotional group called Jazz From Bloomington.



the players

There are far too many outstanding jazz musicians in Bloomington to list them all, but here are 25 of the best with comments from their peers.

SAXOPHONE

Al Cobine

A longtime composer and big-band leader, Cobine worked with Henry Mancini and other popular performers. He’s so respected in these parts that Jazz From Bloomington named their annual award after him. The first recipient? Al Cobine.

Michael Eaton

Eaton is a member of (x)-Tet, Art Deco, and the avant-garde collective The Saxophone Cartel. “He’s a solid but still adventurous musician who plays with a soulful and melodic flair in a free mode.”

Morgan Price

A member of The Saxophone Cartel, “he’s got great chops for classic jazz playing and is a monster when it comes to improvisation/outside soloing.”

Dennis Riggins

A Bloomington North graduate and member of the group Wide Open, Riggins is described as “a progressive, post-bebop player.”

Tom Walsh

An IU School of Music jazz professor, “He has a beautiful tone and never plays a wrong note.”

PIANO



Julian Bransby

A recent Bloomington North High School graduate, he’s a piano prodigy still in his teens, playing with the group Wide Open. His high school trio recently won *Downbeat Magazine’s* annual Student Music Awards competition.

Luke Gillespie

An IU School of Music jazz professor, he garners much praise from his contemporary players. “Gillespie can do anything from Bill Evans to Erroll Garner and still sound like himself; tremendous breadth of style. I’ve never heard him play anything the same way twice; he’s always in the moment and in the pocket.”



Monika Herzig

Co-founder of Jazz From Bloomington, and an instructor at IU School of Music, Herzig recently released a CD entitled *In Your Own Sweet Voice*, a tribute to women songwriters. “She’s accessible, and likes to blend pop into her sound.”

TRUMPET

Pat Harbison

An IU School of Music jazz professor and member of the group Wide Open, Harbison performs frequently in New York and other major cities around the country. “He’s such a great educator and can play any style.”

Kyle Quass

A former member of the Gyrogenics, Quass keeps a low profile these days. “His trumpet style is conceptually reminiscent of Woody Shaw or Greg Osby; his compositions often utilize rhythmic layers, odd meters, and non-conventional harmony.”

Dominic Spira

A retired IU School of Music professor, Spira plays in a swing style. “He has tremendous technique, is a great arranger for big bands, and he’s entertaining—think Louis Prima as a jazz educator.”

David Miller

Jazz Fables promoter and performer, member of avant-garde groups Art Deco and Ut Haus, Miller is steeped in bebop, hard bop, and free jazz influence. “It’s hard to imagine the jazz scene here without him.”

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TROMBONE

Dave Pavolka

Pavolka toured with musicians such as Henry Mancini and Tony Bennett and works as a band director at Batchelor Middle School. "He has a swing style and is a very exuberant player."

Gary Potter

An IU School of Music professor, Potter is a bassist and a former member of Woody Herman's big band. "He brings that big-band credibility and plays an important role at the Music School as a teacher and an administrator."

Nate Sutton

An IU School of Music graduate, "He plays in a J.J. Johnson/Curtis Fuller modern mode and incorporates blues and melodicism into his solos."

BASS

Jeremy Allen

Originally a trombonist, Allen "Makes everyone sound better. It's like riding in a Cadillac. Thank God IU was able to create a position for him."

CELLO

David Baker

The IU School of Music jazz studies dean and founder of the program, his compositions, publications, and honors are too numerous to count. In his spare time (this man has spare time?), he's the leader of the Smithsonian Masterworks Jazz Orchestra.

FLUTE

Lida Baker

"She has bigger ears than I do" for hearing the music, says her husband David Baker. Others describe her playing as "very melodic, very modern; she has a million different ideas for how to get around the instrument."

DRUMS



Danny Deckard

A Bloomington North graduate and member of the fusion

group Kwijibo. "The consummate drummer, Danny plays great in any style."

Steve Houghton

The IU School of Music percussion professor, Houghton plays vibes as well as drums. "He has impeccable timing with Art Blakey-like fire. He's a synthesis of everything a drummer should be."

GUITAR

Peter Kienle

A member of the groups Kwijibo and Beeblebrox, Kienle is rooted in the fusion tradition but just as competent with traditional styles. "He plays in the style of John McLaughlin and John Scofield, but with a very individual approach to creating lines and harmonies."

Paul Kirk

A professor of mathematics at IU and self-taught guitarist, Kirk "plays very fluid, organic, long phrases like breaths—you could compare him to Pat Metheny."

VOCALS

Rachel Caswell

She swings, she scats, she's "a consummate musician with a great choice of material." In the past several years, Caswell has released a debut CD, *Some Other Time*, and also appeared on her sister Sara's two CDs.

Janiece Jaffe

"She's a modern pop-sensibility jazz singer with a lovely voice and she's a very spiritually centered performer." She has released several CD's, many of which are available in local stores.

Sarah Flint

Sarah is a swing-based vocalist for the trio Sarah's Swing Set. "She has an engaging stage persona and has built up quite a local following."

Kwijibo at Max's Place

Peter Kienle (guitar, Chapman stick)

Dan Deckard (drums)

Joe Donnelly (tenor sax,

baritone sax, midi-wind instrument)

Ron Kadiish (electric bass)



Established in 1999, the collective has brought to town renowned modern artists such as trumpeter Dave Douglas and saxophonist Greg Osby, in addition to conducting numerous outreach and educational activities. It's the first time since the 1970's that national acts have come to Bloomington with any regularity.

Brian Kearney, member of the longstanding avant-garde jazz group Ut Haus, remembers attending many of the concerts here in the 1970's, when audiences might see Sun Ra at the Bluebird, or Dexter Gordon at IU's Frangipani Room. He also recalls Rapp's Pizza Train, the primary venue for local jazz in those days. "Terry Cook, an incredible sax player, was wailing away one night," recalls Kearney. "He was amping it up, taking the music inside and out in an energized but amazingly proficient manner, when his solo was interrupted by the Rapp's P.A. system: 'Number 18...large pepperoni with anchovies and peppers, your order is ready.'"

These days—or nights—the venues are considerably less intrusive. At Max's Place on 7th Street, listeners can enjoy pizza and jazz at the same time, sans P.A. announcements. Other eateries such as Café Django, where you can sometimes catch Miller playing with his band Art Deco, and Grazie's offer intimate spaces for both music fans and casual diners.

What's particularly striking about a tour of the local clubs and restaurants featuring live jazz is the diversity in styles. On a recent

Wednesday evening, dancers took to the floor at the Players Pub as the Stardusters Swing Band ran through a set that included Carmichael's ballad "Skylark" and a brassy rendition of the 1970's disco anthem "I Love the Nightlife." The music was infectious, causing even the waitstaff to put a little swing and sway in their walk as they moved from table to table, and it served as a reminder of jazz's rhythmic roots in entertainment culture.

A few blocks away, Jeff Isaac's Postmodern Jazz Quartet was performing at the wine bar and restaurant *tutto bène*. A young-to-middle-aged crowd sat on couches and in armchairs as the Postmoderns provided a laidback sound reminiscent, at times, of Miles Davis' mid-1960's quintet. Other numbers, like the standard "Summertime," revealed a sultry, soul-pop influence. The music here was not about dancing or engaged listening; it was about hanging

Cartel recently recorded a live CD there on a Saturday afternoon before an audience of about 60. The Cartel played loud and long, pushing to the ecstatic limits of coherence, revealing a more-than-nodding acquaintance with everything from the joyous polyphonics of 1920's jazz and the screaming split-tones of 1960's free-jazz icon Albert Ayler

Jeff Isaac's Post Modern Jazz Quartet at *tutto bène*
Jonathan Elmer (trombone)
Pat Harbison (trumpet)
Dennis Riggins (sax)
Ron Kadfish (bass)
Nate Johnson (sax)



Jeff Isaac's Post Modern Jazz Quartet at *tutto bène*
Jeff Isaac (keyboard)
Dan Deckard (drums)

to the cartoonish mechanics-run-amok world of Raymond Scott. During one number a musician's cellphone went off just as the band was descending into the quiet ending, and they held their final notes in an ultimately successful bid to outlast the ring tones. Somehow, it ended up sounding organic, as if the ringing had been planned. For listeners hoping to find what jazz writer Whitney Balliett once described as "the sound of

surprise," Space 101 might be the place.

What has made Bloomington such a vibrant home for jazz? Most of the credit must go to Indiana University. "Bloomington without the School of Music would be Bedford," says Harbison, referring to a town 20 miles south of

The music was infectious, causing even the waitstaff to put a little swing and sway in their walk while they moved from table to table.

out on a rainy evening and drinking out of sleek, elegantly curved glasses. The people sitting close to the group followed its performance with interest, while diners seated farther away rarely clapped at the end of numbers. Still, with its cool, artistic environment and inviting acoustics, *tutto bène* is cited by local musicians Harbison and pianist Monika Herzig as one of their favorite places to play.

At Space 101, a loft on the corner of the downtown Square, jazz is *all* about the listening. Local avant-garde group The Saxophone



photograph by Tom Sito

Rahsaan Roland Kirk and the Barber Brothers

Multi-instrumentalist Rahsaan Roland Kirk was a legendary figure on the wild 1960's and 1970's jazz scene, and there are still people who recall seeing him at his last concert, given in Bloomington on December 4, 1977, at the Frangipani Room. During the concert, Kirk is reputed to have said words to the effect that, "At twelve someone has to go, but another will come along to take his place."

Kirk, 40, died the next day at noon as he was leaving town. Some 20 years later two brilliant twin brothers enrolled at the

IU School of Music and enthralled jazz fans with their performances for the next several years. Their names? Rahsaan and Roland Barber.

Currently, Rahsaan, a trombonist, and Roland, a saxophonist, are completing graduate studies at the Manhattan School of Music while in the midst of their fourth year as leaders of the Barber Brothers Jazz Quintet, performing in New York and at top venues throughout the country.

Dave Miller's Art Deco Quartet
at Café Django

David Miller (trumpet, flugelhorn)
Michael Eaton (tenor & alto saxes, clarinet)
Steve Johnson (acoustic base)
Chad Kethcart (drums, percussion)

the city. It's not just the college scene, though. For the past 25 years, Janice Stockhouse has led a strong band program at Bloomington North High School that's produced a number of outstanding musicians, including current piano prodigy Julian Bransby. Stockhouse thrives on teaching jazz to "these bright Bloomington kids outside the norm," as she describes them. She likes to introduce them to the music via accessible, funk-or-rock influenced compositions like Herbie Hancock's "Watermelon Man." "Then they discover the joy of creating," says Stockhouse. "You're like, 'Who wants to take a solo?' and boom, there's ten kids wanting to take a solo."

Will jazz in Bloomington continue to thrive? Harbison thinks so, citing the city's growth as a lifestyle capital, and the growth



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on the radio

WFIU 103.7 FM

Joe Bourne's Just You and Me program: Monday through Friday, 3:30 pm to 5 pm.

Jazz music: Friday nights from 8 pm to midnight.

WFHB 98.1 FM

Jazz programming: Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights from 7 pm to 9 pm.

of the IU jazz studies program, which now has eight faculty members and more than 60 students, the highest enrollment in its history. He and pianist Herzig, who teaches as an adjunct at the School of Music, both lament that most of the gigs available to musicians in Bloomington don't pay much, and Herzig cites the lack of a club solely devoted to jazz as one drawback. Saxophone Cartel member Morgan Price notes that it's sometimes difficult for non-traditional groups such as his to find a place to play. Still, he describes a "pretty amazing, pretty big experimental scene" that flourishes outside of the clubs and restaurants. Finally, there are the newcomers—the well-off retirees

the places

Bear's Place

1316 E. 3rd St.
812-339-3460
www.bearsplacebar.com
The legendary Jazz Fables series in the back room at Bear's takes place every Thursday year-round from 5:30 to 8 pm. A full American menu, beer, wine, and liquor are served.

Café Django

116 N. Grant St.
812-335-1297
Jazz is offered on either Friday or Saturday and sometimes both nights. Performers are announced on local radio and on flyers available in the restaurant a week ahead of time. Café Django serves Asian cuisine, beer, and wine.

Encore Café

316 W. 6th St.
812-333-7312
www.bloomingfoods.org
Live musicians play every Friday beginning at 5 pm and Saturday at 7 pm, though the music is not always jazz. The cafeteria-style restaurant offers natural meats and vegetarian dishes. Wine and beer are served.

Grazie Italian Eatery

106 W. 6th St.
812-323-0303
grazieitalianeatery.com
Jazz is featured on Thursdays from 6 pm to 9 pm and a jazz pianist on Fridays, 6 pm to 9 pm. A full Italian menu, wine, and beer are served.

The Musical Arts Center

1201 E. 3rd St.
Merrill Hall 003
812-855-1583
www.music.indiana.edu
On Saturday, August 12 at 8 pm the renowned Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra is performing. Tickets are available by phone, online at ticketmaster.com, or at the box office.

Malibu Grill

106 N. Walnut
812-332-4334
www.malibugrill.net
Thursday nights, a jazz pianist performs, beginning at 7 pm. On Friday and Saturday nights at 8 pm, groups perform, usually jazz, but not always. An upscale American menu is featured and a full bar.

Max's Place

109 W. 7th St.
812-336-5169
www.maxsplace.info
Jazz nights are held on the second and fourth Tuesdays of the month, starting at 8 pm New York-style pizza is the house specialty. Beer and wine are served.

tutto bène

213 S. Rogers St.
812-330-1060
www.bloomingtonwinecafe.com
Jazz is offered Wednesday nights from 8 pm to 11 pm and Jeff Isaac's Postmodern Jazz Quartet is in residence on the last Tuesday of every month. Special performances are offered on other nights. A full listing of events can be found on the website. A tapas-style menu, beer, and more than 300 wines are available.

Players Pub

424 S. Walnut
812-334-2080
theplayerspub.com
Jazz performers are booked throughout the year. Information is available on the website. The Stardusters Orchestra is on tap for listening and dancing the last Wednesday of every month. A full American menu and beer and wine are served.

Jazz at the Station

825 N. Walnut
This new jazz club and restaurant is scheduled to open in late October in the old railway station. The owners are local businesspeople Cheryl Underwood and Tariq Khan. It promises to be Bloomington's first venue in the 21st century devoted solely to jazz.



who appreciate the music and the new generation of jazz students that hits the Indiana University campus every autumn.

"These kids are incredibly talented," says Baker, "and they're much better-informed than the kids of my generation. They now have a mechanism for learning jazz. We want to give them all of the tools, but not tell them what to do with the tools. Jazz education is like the Gutenberg printing press; we're making the carrying of the message available to the masses."

While Bloomington cannot take credit for Johann Gutenberg, it can lay claim to Carmichael, Baker, and others who have made significant contributions to American jazz. Walk the tree-lined streets of the city on any summer evening and you may well hear the melodic surge of a piano, the pulsing arpeggio of a saxophone, or the clarion invocation of a trumpet solo. What accounts for this relaxed state of beauty, this sense that music is an integral part of life here? Maybe it's the stardust in the air. ✨

