



JAZZ

1,000 NIGHTS OF

Jazz Fables Celebrates 20 Years at Bear's Place

Imagine a place where you could go every week to hear live jazz. Imagine that the jazz would be of national caliber, performed by skilled and seasoned musicians, and representative of nearly every style to emerge in the music's evolution over the past 80 years. Imagine that the club was within easy walking or driving distance, and that admission would be around \$5.

If you live in Bloomington, you don't have to imagine such a place; it exists.

By David Brent Johnson

David Miller on trumpet and Tom Walsh on tenor sax at Bear's Place in the early 1990s.



(top) The 20th Anniversary Concert: (from left) cellist David Baker, Deno Sanders on drums, David Miller on flugelhorn, Tom Walsh on saxophone, and Lida Baker on flute.



(bottom, from left) Luke Gillespie (back) piano, double-bass player Jeremy Allen, Baker, and Miller. Photos by Steve Raymer

For the past 20 years, the Jazz Fables concert series has featured artists of local and national repute every Thursday evening at Bear's Place, a restaurant and bar on East 3rd Street. The music takes place in Bear's back room where musicians hold forth from a triangular stage with a burgundy, wavy-V motif behind them. Think of Bear's as Bloomington's version of the Five Spot, the legendary 1950s New York jazz club that played host to artists such as Thelonious Monk, Ornette Coleman, and Indiana University's own David Baker, chair of the Jazz Studies Department. And think of Jazz Fables as an Indiana hipster's fairy tale that you could name "1,000 Nights of Jazz."

It's impossible to imagine the Jazz Fables series without its host and impresario, trumpeter David Miller. Just past 60, Miller has been a relentless force for jazz in Bloomington ever since arriving here as a student in 1966. He founded a band called Jazz Fables in 1977, and for five years the group performed regularly at a now-vanished restaurant at 6th Street and Washington called Rapp's Pizza Train.

Miller spent the 1980s gaining valuable experience booking and promoting shows at nightclubs around town such as Jake's and Second Story, while continuing to lead his Jazz Fables band at venues such as the Video Saloon, negotiating what was then a spotty and erratic local scene for live jazz. At the end of the '80s, Miller finally found a potential home for his vision of an ongoing jazz concert series on the east side of town.

The Fables series is born

Bear's Place had occasionally featured jazz before, as part of its mix of blues, comedy, folk, and the Ryder Film Series. In the early 1980s there was a Tuesday evening "Jazz 'n Jam" series often featuring pianist Jim Beard, who later played professionally with Wayne Shorter. "It was a direct predecessor in terms of the 'house band plus guest' format that I later used," Miller says. But it wasn't until 1989, after the host of a Thursday-night movie series at Bear's unexpectedly passed away, that Miller approached Bear's Place owner Ray McConn about doing an ongoing jazz concert series. The series would feature the Jazz Fables band each week for two sets, with a special guest joining for the second set. McConn agreed to try it, and on September 7, 1989, the Jazz Fables played their debut concert, highlighting the music of Miles Davis, with David Baker as the guest artist. Admission was \$1.50, and the line stretched out the door.

McConn, who started Bear's Place in 1973 and ran it for 28 years, says the Jazz Fables series was a boon for Bear's and he credits Miller for its success. "I had the room, I was willing to give it a shot and liked doing it, but it's because of David that it worked. I took care of paying for the advertising and the soundman, and he took care of collecting the money, putting out the flyers, and getting the acts in. He always got a great crowd, so

from 5:30-7:30 every Thursday evening you essentially had a full house back there, 120 people or so, who enjoyed the music, liked to drink, liked to eat, and it was just a wonderful symbiotic situation."

Some of the Jazz Fables concert series' success can be attributed to the location of Bear's Place—directly across the street from Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music—as well as its 5:30 pm start time and its Thursday evening slot. "People could come there after class, catch the first set, and go home," says Miller. "If they were students, they could come to whichever set when they didn't have a class. And Thursday night was, as it turned out, the best possible night we could have had it on. By the time you get to Friday and Saturday night, people are going out to the bars to meet people, party and dance, but on Thursday night they're not quite in that blowout mode yet."

The series has also thrived in large part because of the musicians that Miller has brought in, many of them IU School of Music students and faculty—or students who later became faculty. One such student-to-professor, saxophonist Tom Walsh, played a key role as musical director for the Jazz Fables band the first two years of the concert series. "David set a very ambitious task for the group by having a tribute to a different artist each week—one week it was the music of John Coltrane, then it was Ornette Coleman, or Charles Mingus, or Sun Ra," says Walsh.

"Just to get into the mindset to play such diverse music from week to week would be enough of a challenge, but added to that was the task of writing out much of the music. Virtually every week David would say, 'There's this great tune that no one ever plays...' and the reason no one played it was because there was no written music available. So he would ask, 'Could you write it out?' I would listen to the recording and write out parts for each of the instruments in the band. Sometimes it took me three hours to figure out and notate a single tune." Walsh, who stepped down from weekly duty in the early 1990s, continues to appear frequently in the series.

Bringing jazz history to life

"It made sense for us to have individual programs that had distinct qualities or character, doing a tribute to Thelonious Monk or Charles Mingus," Miller says. "That really gave us a program that we could promote to the community and say, 'Hey, come to the concert, you won't hear this anywhere else!'"

As part of his presentation, Miller often gives information about the composer and the context of the music. "The whole idea was to appeal in an educational way to people to come to the series, find out more about this music, get more interested in the artists we were presenting, whether they be local, regional, or national—a programmatic approach like what you'd find at a classical concert," he says.

The departure of Walsh from his band, as well as that of pianist Luke Gillespie (another student who became



(top) Saxophonist Tom Walsh takes a solo turn as David Miller looks on. Photo by Steve Raymer



(middle) The Jazz Fables Quintet, 1990. (from left) Dan Hostetler (drummer), Tom Walsh (alto sax), Jonathan Paul (bassist), David Miller (trumpet), Luke Gillespie (piano).



'Hey, come to the concert, you won't hear this anywhere else!'

an IU faculty member and who performs often at Bear's), ultimately forced Miller to change the nature of the series. Both left because of teaching commitments elsewhere. "I couldn't keep a working band together after that, so I started doing more collaborations, having other groups come in and play," he says.

Miller has remained committed to presenting the music of individual jazz composers, and also to including a wide variety of styles in his week-to-week lineups. On any given Thursday concert-goers might encounter the traditional Dixieland sounds of the B-Town Bearcats, the modern hardbop approach of the Wide Open Quintet, the Postmodern Jazz Quartet, the swing of the Al Cobine Big Band, the progressive bop of David Baker and the IU jazz faculty, the quasi-Dada and avant-garde of Ut Haus, the fusion of Splinter Group, or the jazz vocals of singers such as Janiece Jaffe and Rachel Caswell. In just a few weeks concert-goers can start to develop a pretty good working knowledge of jazz from the 1920s to the present. The very name of the series, as Baker points out, evokes the notion of a mythological-like narrative that brings jazz history to life.

The Sun Ra tribute

One of the most colorful, recurring shows is the tribute that Miller leads to Sun Ra, the charismatic, theatrical American big-band leader who brought his brand of psychedelic swing, hardbop, and avant-garde jazz to Bloomington several times in the 1970s and early 1980s. The band plays Sun Ra's music and dresses up in elaborate costumes that Miller's wife Lucinda made based on photos of Sun Ra's group. Miller reads Sun Ra's poetry from the stage, and the band does chants and marches through the bar playing "Space Is the Place," evoking the spectacle and trippy flair of a Sun Ra stage show, and doing it with the polished presentation that has come to mark Jazz Fables concerts.

That devotion to polished presentation stems from the second Jazz Fables show ever done at Bear's Place—a gig that Miller was unable to attend. David Baker did attend, and afterward he told Miller that the band's playing had been too loose and errant. "I decided from that point on we were going to try to do the original arrangements [of classic jazz tunes]," Miller says. "And that required a lot of work on the part of Tom Walsh, to get all these arrangements together. Every week we had to learn two sets worth of music, and we had to have a rehearsal. We were not going to go up on the bandstand unprepared."

"Yeah, I chewed him out!" Baker laughs when asked about Miller's recollection. "I said, 'If you're going to do this, this music is as important as the Beaux Arts Trio or going to hear a famous string quartet. So do it right.'"

Like others, Baker offers high praise for Miller's efforts in sustaining the series. "David has really been on top of it—making sure he knows the birthdays of these famous people, knowing what their quirks were, knowing what kinds of tunes they were most famous

for," Baker says. "But more than anybody else, David's been the entrepreneur. He's treated that group and that series like it's his *raison d'être*. And he's been a force in keeping our kids in the music school working, as well as our faculty."

The role of IU

"The School of Music is separate from what I do," says Miller. "But for years I've presented faculty and grad students and students and alumni of the IU Jazz Studies Department. And I feel one of the reasons we've been successful is we're directly connecting with people who are part of our community. I've been able to bring recognition to the fact that all these great jazz educators and their students are a treasure that the community should appreciate and recognize, that many of these people have done incredible things, or that some of the young musicians here now will do great things elsewhere in the future. The program has produced many people who've gone on to be wonderful jazz educators and performers in other places. And many of them come back to play."

Miller and other Jazz Fables performers also cite the value that students and faculty gain from playing at Bear's. "In the early years of the series, we were the only venue in town where anybody could play the music seriously for an audience that was listening to it," Miller says. "We've had many, many student jazz ensembles, but also the grad students and the faculty get a chance to play...you know, you're playing a gig in front of people. It's not a classroom, it's a gig! It's a chance to play the music. And that's how I learned to play the music, playing with the original Jazz Fables group at Rapp's Pizza Train...and there's no substitute for that."

"Playing before a paying audience is the real deal," says Michael Weiss, the pianist in the original Jazz Fables, who's gone on to national renown and who will return to Bloomington to perform at Bear's Place on October 29. "It's a captive audience, it's a listening audience, and you are the performer—with every professional responsibility that comes with that. Jazz Fables is a great training ground for students across the street to learn those responsibilities. And if they handle it right and understand what they need to do, then they're all the more equipped when they go out into the world to make a living and pursue jazz as a profession."

Sometimes it's the artists who share the stage with the Jazz Fables regulars who push everybody's game to a higher level. "Some of my favorite memories of playing at Jazz Fables are the times I got to play with guys like [Indianapolis jazz legends] Pookie Johnson and Jimmy Coe," says Walsh. "Standing next to Jimmy Coe and thinking, 'Man, this guy played with Charlie Parker in Jay McShann's [1940s] band!' The sense of history you gain from playing with guys like that and just soaking up the feeling of how they play is indescribable."

For performers and for listeners, there's also the atmosphere of a Jazz Fables show. Violinist Sara Caswell, an IU graduate who has performed at Jazz Fables many



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(top) A full house turned out for the 20th Anniversary concert.

(middle) Enraptured by the music.

(bottom) The man behind Jazz Fables: David Miller with trumpet and flugelhorn in front of Bear's Place. Photos by Steve Raymer



times, often with her sister, singer Rachel Caswell, now works and lives in New York City and returns for occasional concerts. "My memories of concerts and the venue are a collection of mental snapshots," she says. "It's the audience's enthusiastic response to a tune, the vibration of the drums coming through the stage floorboards, the energy shared between the band and audience, the dull thump of the room's swinging door, the ratchet-like noise of a credit card receipt printing... it's those moments that define the musical and social experience that musicians and audiences love about a Jazz Fables concert at Bear's Place."

The audiences love it

It's that atmosphere and the quality of music that keeps drawing back audience members like John and Julia Lawson, week after week. The Lawsons first attended a Jazz Fables show in 2002, on a night when jazz educator and saxophonist Jamie Aeberesold was the featured performer. "I remember thinking, 'You mean you can get this kind of jazz in Bloomington for \$5?'" John Lawson wondrously recalls. He and his wife come to the concerts twice a month and cite some of the out-of-town performers Miller's brought in as their favorites, along with series regulars such as trumpeter Dominic Spera and the Jazz Fables house band. "And you get to see people like Saxophone Cartel," Julie Lawson adds, "so out there, with instruments I'd never seen before... it was awesome!"

"World-class jazz in a small-town market," comments Ed Perkins, another series devotee who jokes that he's part of the "geriatric jazz" set. "It's a bargain, and you learn a lot, too."

Miller takes pride in the kind of audience that Jazz Fables has cultivated over the years. "We've created an atmosphere where people expect that when they come here, they're going to listen to the music," he says. "There's an educational component about how to listen to the music, the etiquette of it. The Jazz Fables audience is a wonderful listening audience. If you play well, and you connect with the audience as a performer, those people give it back to you! And the more they give back to you, the more you give back to them."

Recently the Jazz Fables concert series has seen a decline in attendance. "We're looking at audiences half the size of what we did in our best years," Miller says. He blames the recession, which has taken a toll on the jazz scene across the country. Still, the series retains a loyal following, and as long as Miller remains at the forefront, hustling, promoting, working, and playing, there's no reason to doubt that 1,000 nights of jazz will go on and on. When it debuted in 1989, Miller says the Bloomington *Herald-Times* ran a story with the headline, "New series has a chance to have long life." Twenty years later, 1,000 fables have become the stuff of Indiana jazz legend. *