

# Where Jazz Lives Now

by Giovanni Russonello  
Photographs by Sinna Nasseri

The jazz club, with its dim lighting and closely packed tables, looms large in our collective imagination. But today, the music is thriving in a host of different spaces.



*The vocalist, flutist and producer Melanie Charles sings at a rehearsal in her Brooklyn home, which has become a rehearsal space, recording studio and gathering spot.*

A disco ball threw beads of light across a crowded dance floor on a recent Monday night in Lower Manhattan while old film footage rolled across a wall by the stage. A half-dozen musicians were up there, churning waves of rhythm that reshaped over time: A transition might start with a double-tap of chords, reggae-style, from the keyboardist Ray Angry, or with a new vocal line, improvised and looped by the singer Kamilah.

A classically trained pianist who's logged time with D'Angelo and the Roots, Angry doesn't "call tunes," in the jazzman's parlance. As usual, his group was cooking up grooves from scratch, treating the audience as a participant. Together they filled the narrow, two-story club with rhythm and body heat till well past midnight.

Since before the coronavirus pandemic, Angry has led his [Producer Mondays](#) jam sessions every week (Covid restrictions permitting) at Nublu, an Alphabet City venue

that feels more like a small European discothèque than a New York jazz club. With a diverse clientele and a varied slate of shows, Nublu's management keeps one foot in the jazz world while booking electronic music and rock, too. On Mondays, it all comes together.



*The bassist Jonathan Michel, the drummer Bendji Allonce and the keyboardist Axel Tosca at Cafe Erzulie in Brooklyn.*



*Cafe Erzulie, a Haitian restaurant and bar, hosts a wide range of music including a weekly Jazz Night.*

As New York nightlife has bubbled back up over the past few months, it's been a major comfort to return to the legacy jazz rooms, like the [Village Vanguard](#) or the Blue Note, [most](#) of which survived the pandemic. But the real blood-pumping moments — the shows where you can sense that other musicians are in the room listening for new tricks, and it feels like the script is still being written onstage — have been happening most often in venues that don't look like typical jazz clubs. They're spaces where jazz bleeds outward, and converses with a less regimented audience.

“The scene has started to fracture,” the drummer and producer Kassa Overall, 39, said in a recent interview, admitting that he didn't know exactly what venue would become ground zero for the next generation of innovators. “I don't think it's really found a home yet. And that's good, actually.”

It's an uncommonly exciting time for live jazz. Young bandleaders have wide followings again — Makaya McCraven, Esperanza Spalding, Robert Glasper and Christian Scott aTunde Adjuah each rack up millions of plays on streaming services — and a generation of musicians and listeners is lined up to follow their lead, or break away. This year, for the first time, [the most-nominated artist at the Grammys](#) is a jazz musician who crossed over: Jon Batiste.



*The saxophonist Isaiah Collier gives a fist bump at the Arts for Art On Line Salon at the Clemente in Manhattan.*



*The saxophonist Isaiah Collier and the bassist Tyler Mitchell at the Arts for Art On Line Salon.*



*The drummer Andrew Drury performs as part of Jason Kao Hwang's Human Rites Trio at the Arts for Art On\_Line Salon.*

These players' music has never really seemed at home in jazz clubs, nor has the more avant-garde and spiritual-leaning work of artists like James Brandon Lewis, Shabaka Hutchings, Angel Bat Dawid, Kamasi Washington, Nicole Mitchell or the Sun Ra Arkestra, all of whom are in high demand these days.

Maybe it's a case of coincidental timing. A confluence of forces — the pandemic, the volatility of New York real estate, an increasingly digital culture — has upset the landscape, and with the music mutating fast, it also seems to be finding new homes. Jazz is a music of live embodiment. Part of its power has always been to change the way that we assemble (jazz clubs were some of the first truly integrated social spaces in northern cities), and performers have always responded to the environment where they're being heard. So updating our sense of where this music happens might be fundamental to re-establishing jazz's place in culture, especially at a moment when the culture seems ready for a new wave of jazz.



*A musician warms up on melodica at Nublu's Producer Mondays.*



*The scene at Nublu, an Alphabet City venue that feels more like a small European discothèque than a New York jazz club.*



*Producer Mondays sessions regularly fill the narrow, two-story club with rhythm and body heat till well past midnight.*

**FIFTY-NINE YEARS** ago, the poet and critic Amiri Baraka (writing then as LeRoi Jones) [reported in \*DownBeat\* magazine](#) that New York’s major clubs had lost interest in jazz’s “new thing.” The freer, more confrontational and Afrocentric styles of improvising that had taken hold — [Ornette Coleman](#), [John Coltrane](#) and [Cecil Taylor](#)’s revolution, for short — were no longer welcome in commercial clubs. So artists started booking themselves in downtown coffee shops and their own lofts instead.

The music has never stopped churning and evolving, but since the 1960s, jazz clubs — a vestige of the Prohibition era, with their windowless intimacy and closely clustered tables — have rarely felt like a perfect home for the music’s future development. At the same time, it’s been impossible to shake our attachment to the

notion that clubs are the “authentic” home of jazz, a jealously guarded idyll in any American imagination.

But [Joel Ross](#), 26, a celebrated vibraphonist living in Brooklyn, said that especially in the two years since coronavirus shutdowns began, many young musicians have become unstuck from the habit of making the rounds to typical jazz venues. “Cats are just playing in random restaurants and random spots,” he said, naming a few musician-run sessions that have started up in Brooklyn and Manhattan, but not in traditional clubs.

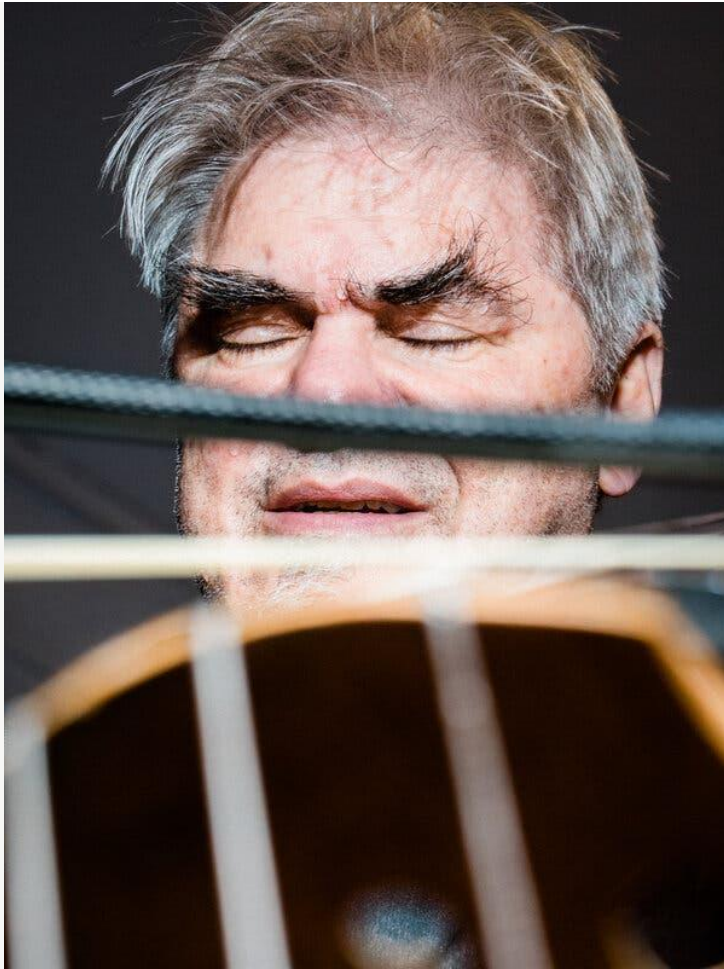
Sometimes it’s not a public thing at all. “People are getting together in their own homes more, and piecing music together,” Ross said.

The vocalist, flutist and producer [Melanie Charles](#), 34, has made her Bushwick home into a rehearsal space, recording studio and gathering spot. And when she performs, it’s usually not at straight-ahead jazz clubs. Her music uses electronics and calls for something heavier than an upright bass, so those venues just might not have what’s needed. “Musicians like me and my peers, we need some bump on the bottom,” she said. “Our material won’t work in those spaces the way we want to do it.”



*Collier warms up with the pianist Jordan Williams at the Arts for Art On\_Line Salon.*





*The bassist Ken Filiano performing with Jason Kao Hwang's Human Rites Trio at the Arts for Art On\_Line Salon.*

High among Charles's preferred places to play is Cafe Erzulie, a Haitian restaurant and bar tucked along the border between the Bushwick and Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhoods of Brooklyn. With bluish-green walls painted with palm-leaf patterns and bistro tables arrayed around the room and the patio, the club hosts a wide range of music, including R&B jams; album release shows and birthday parties for genre-bending artists like [KeiyaA](#) and [Pink Siifu](#); and a weekly Jazz Night on Thursdays.

Jazz Night returned this month after a late-pandemic-induced hiatus, and demand had not ebbed: The room was close to capacity, with a crowd of young, colorfully dressed patrons seated at tables and wrapped around the bar.

Jonathan Michel, a bassist and musical confidante of Charles, was joined by the keyboardist Axel Tosca and the percussionist Bendji Allonce, playing rumba-driven rearrangements of Gnarls Barkley's "Crazy," jazz standards and traditional Caribbean songs. The crowd was tuned in all the way, which didn't always mean quiet. But when Allonce and Tosca dropped out and Michel took a thoughtful, not overly insistent bass solo, the room hushed.

Charles sat in with the trio partway through its set, singing a heart-aching original, "Symphony," and an old Haitian song, "Lot Bo." Almost immediately, she had 90

percent of the place silent, and 100 percent paying attention. With the band galloping over “Lot Bo,” she took a pause from improvising in flowing, diving, melismatic runs to explain what the song’s lyrics mean: “I have to cross that river; when I get to the other side, I’ll rest,” she said. “It’s been hard out here in these streets,” she told the crowd, receiving a hum of recognition. “Rest is radical, low-key.”



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Cafe Erzulie is just one of a handful of relatively new venues in Brooklyn that have established their own identities, independent of jazz, but provide the music an environment to thrive. [Public Records](#) opened [in Gowanus in 2019](#) with the primary mission to present electronic music in a hi-fi setting. It had initially planned to have improvising combos play in its cafe space, separate from the main sound room, but its curators have recently welcomed the music in more fully.

[Wild Birds](#), a Crown Heights eatery and venue, has made jazz part of its regular programming alongside cumbia, Afrobeat and other live music. It will often start a given night with a live band and audience seating, then transition to a dance floor scenario with a D.J. In Greenpoint, [IRL Gallery](#) has been hosting experimental jazz regularly alongside visual art exhibitions and electronic-music bookings. Due south, in Prospect Lefferts Gardens, [the Owl Music Parlor](#) hosts jazz as well as chamber music and singer-songwriter fare; [Zanmi](#), a few blocks away, is another Haitian restaurant where jazz performances often feel like a roux of related musical cultures.

And jazz is proving to be more than just a feather in a venue’s cultural cap. The rooms are actually filling up. “For one, we cater to a very specific sort of

demographic: young people of color, who I think really understand and appreciate jazz music,” said Mark Luxama, the owner of Cafe Erzulie, explaining Jazz Night’s success. “We’ve been able to fill seats.”

Besides, he added, “it’s really not about the money on Jazz Night. I think it’s more about creating community, and being able to create space for the musicians to do their thing and have a really good time.”



*The scene at Producer Mondays, a jam session held weekly at Nublu in Manhattan.*



*The pianist Ray Angry playing with the Council of Goldfinger, including Kamilah on vocals and Andraleia Buch on bass at a recent Producer Mondays night.*

**FROM THE START**, the story of jazz clubs in New York has been a story of white artists receiving preferential treatment. The first time history remembers jazz being played in a New York establishment was winter 1917, when the Dixieland Original Jass Band — all white, and dishonestly named (so little about their sound was original) — traveled up from New Orleans to play at Reisenweber’s Café in Columbus Circle. The performances led to a record deal, and the Dixieland band had soon recorded the world’s first commercially distributed jazz sides, for the Victor label.

During Prohibition, jazz became the preferred entertainment in speakeasies and mob-run joints. The business of the scene remained mostly in white hands, even in Harlem. But many clubs served a mixed clientele, and jazz venues were some of the first public establishments to serve Black and white people together in the 1920s and ’30s. (Of course, there were [notable exceptions](#).) In interviews for the archivist Jeff Gold’s recent book, [“Sittin’ In: Jazz Clubs of the 1940s and 1950s.”](#) Quincy Jones and Sonny Rollins each remembered the city’s postwar jazz clubs as a kind of oasis. “It was a place of community and pure love of the art,” Jones said. “You couldn’t find that anywhere else.”

But when [jazz grew too radical](#) for commerce, the avant-garde was booted from the clubs, and up sprang a [loft scene](#). Artists found themselves at once empowered and impoverished. They were booking their own shows and marketing themselves. But Baraka, writing about one of the first cafes to present Cecil Taylor’s trio, noted a fatal flaw. “Whatever this coffee shop is paying Taylor,” he wrote, “it’s certainly not enough.”

The money piece never quite shook out on the avant-garde, and by the 1980s the lofts had mostly closed amid rising rents and unfriendlier civic attitudes toward semi-legal assembly. Still, that form-busting, take-no-prisoners tradition — whether you call it avant-garde, free jazz or [fire music](#) — continues.

In recent decades, it has had a pair of fierce defenders in the bassist [William Parker](#) and the dancer Patricia Nicholson Parker, a [husband-and-wife duo](#) of organizers. The Parkers run the nonprofit Arts for Art, and since the 1990s they’ve presented the standard-bearing Vision Festival, often at the Brooklyn performing arts space [Roulette](#). They’ve also long brought music to [the Clemente](#), a cultural center on the Lower East Side, and during the pandemic they’ve added virtual concerts to their programming.

It’s hard to argue with results, and if Arts for Art has never built a huge audience, it has retained a consistent one while nurturing some of the most expansive minds in improvised music. [James Brandon Lewis](#), the tenor saxophonist whose album “Jesup Wagon” topped many jazz critics’ [appraisals](#) of last year’s releases, has that creative community partly to thank for shepherding his career. [Zoh Amba](#), another uncompromising young saxophonist, is cutting a strong path for herself thanks largely to Arts for Art’s support.

“What Arts for Art asks of people is that they really just play their best,” Nicholson Parker said. “If your music is about getting people to consume alcohol, then that’s different.”

“You need places and people who support that kind of creative freedom,” she added.



*The drummer Kate Gentile at the Jazz Gallery in Manhattan.*

**AT SMALLS JAZZ** Club, the storied West Village basement, purebred jazz jam sessions still stretch into the wee hours on a nightly basis, inheriting some of the infectious, insidery energy that existed in its truest form into the 1990s at [clubs like Bradley's](#). But today it's hard to argue that Smalls is the right destination for hearing the most cutting-edge sounds.

And although they don't usually say it publicly, seasoned players have come to agree that the code of conduct at Smalls' jam sessions went a little flimsy after the 2018 death of [Roy Hargrove](#). His frequent presence as an elder there had helped to keep the bar high, even as the room had come to be filled with musicians whose hands-on experience of jazz arrived mostly through [the distorted lens of formal education](#).

The Jazz Gallery, a nonprofit club 10 blocks north of Union Square, has combined the Bradley's legacy with a dedication to bringing forward new works by progressive young bandleaders, and it's become [an essential hub](#). Rio Sakairi, the Gallery's artistic director, cultivates rising talent and encourages mentorship between generations, often by offering targeted grants and commissions of new work.



*A light switch in Charles's home is adorned with an image of Ella Fitzgerald.*



*An array of instruments in Charles's home.*

She's come to terms with the Gallery's place on the receiving end of jazz's academic pipeline. "You cannot take the fact that jazz is being taught at conservatory out of the equation," she said. "Younger musicians that are coming out, they all go through school systems."

Partly as an extension of the way jazz conservatories work, jam session culture doesn't really exist at the Gallery. Shows end when they're scheduled to. To Charles, it feels "more like a work space" than a club. "I'm glad those spaces are there," she said.

Looking at a jazz scene in transition, a fan can only hope that some of the energy accrued at the margins, in cross-pollinated clubs and more experimental settings, might flow back into spaces where the jazz tradition is a common currency: places like Smalls, the Jazz Gallery and the National Jazz Museum in Harlem (all of which have nonprofit status, and the economic flexibility associated with it).

"It just needs to be reconnected: The Smalls people need to be talking to the Jazz Gallery people; the beat machine kids need to be talking to the Smalls people," said Overall, the drummer. "Maybe there needs to be a space that acknowledges all these different elements."

For now, Charles said, the old haunts still feel needed, and loved. "At the end of the day I still end up at Smalls," she said. "It's like a church whose heyday is gone, but you still come and pay your respects."



*Drury, the drummer, grabs a bite before performing with Jason Kao Hwang's Human Rites Trio.*