

Up All Night

Weekends at Kansas City's Mutual Musicians Foundation—a living shrine to American jazz—are the same as they've always been.

STORY BY GREG BOWERS | PHOTOS BY ANGELA BOND

It's 4:30 in the morning.

And Denyse, who wants to be known by just her first name and wants to spell it with a Y instead of an I, is singing “There will never be another you.”

It's an old jazz standard:

*“There will be many other nights like this
And I'll be standing here with someone new,
There will be other songs to sing, another fall, another spring
But there will never be another you.”*

Each time she gets to that last word, she sings it like it has four or five syllables instead of one.

There's a new player in her back-up band, and nobody seems to notice that he joined. He's wearing a straw hat, a plaid shirt, and a beaded necklace, and he's playing the conga drums. When Denyse asks his name during an interlude, he yells out something that sounds like “Kevin” but the music is too loud to be sure.

Earlier, an older man had been playing the conga drums, but he now appears to have fallen asleep, chin-on-chest, in the corner just behind Kevin.

“There will never be another you-woo-woo-woo,” Denyse sings.

Cymbals. Wait. Big smile. Wait. Applause.

Another night at Kansas City's Mutual Musicians Foundation slides home.

Tucked into a neighborhood off Eighteenth Street in Kansas City—the Mutual Musicians Foundation could be the most important jazz room in the United States.

The National Park Service plaque on the first floor doesn't mince words: “This site possesses national significance in commemorating the history of the United States of America.”



Percussionist Brad Williams holds down the beat for the late-night jazz jam at the Mutual Musicians Foundation in Kansas City. Like many of the musicians, Brad is a regular.



The Mutual Musicians Foundation opens 1 AM on Saturday nights, but the place often isn't crowded until 3 AM or later. By 6 AM, the sun is usually rising when patrons leave.

Above, left to right: Herman Mehari plays the trumpet. Ernest Melton plays alto saxophone. James Ward plays bass. All three regularly play at the Mutual Musicians Foundation.

There's a ten-foot-tall bust of alto saxophonist Charlie "Bird" Parker, Kansas City's biggest jazz name, sitting a few blocks away in the early morning darkness.

But this is a better jazz monument. The walls are jammed with black-and-white photographs of artists who came through here. Big names like Count Basie, Charlie Parker, and Art Tatum—the musician's musician. Intriguing names like The Four Tons of Rhythm, Professor Willie Rice, and Andy Kirk and His Clouds of Joy. Some of them are publicity photos. Others appear to be impromptu performance photos.

The photos share the wall space with twisting timelines plotting the story of the music that started in 1917 and settled into this pink stucco building in 1930. Although Chicago, New York, and New Orleans all played important roles in the history of jazz, Kansas City jazz is distinct. It evolved from blues, ragtime, and even concert band music.

Some things are planned. Some things are unplanned. Kansas City jazz was both. Brand new, yet familiar. Unexpected, yet comfortable. A man playing his saxophone. Another with a clarinet. A keyboard player. A singer. Nobody knew what would happen next, but everybody believed that it would be good.

The photos, smiling through the years, underline that optimism.

"This place talks to you," says Anita Dixon, the foundation's vice president. "The walls talk to you. That's no joke."

Upstairs a large man, who smiles constantly, sits behind the drum set. He keeps his eyes locked on the other members of the core band, a rotating group of musicians hired every Friday and Saturday night to keep the beat going.

The job is to provide the backbeat for other musicians who might drop by when their gigs around town are over and they still feel like keeping the music going.

And if nobody drops by, the core band is supposed to keep the music going anyway.

This is a jam session, impossible to predict, and that's why the drummer has to keep his eyes locked on the others.

Some even claim that the phrase jam session was invented in this room in the days when musicians would crowd in and riff, playing off each other as the clock ticked toward morning.

Some things are planned. Some things are accidents. When you don't know where you're going, every turn is an adventure. When there's no road map, you need to be awake. Every beat is an adrenaline burst. Every pause could signal a turn in direction. Everything is a surprise. You never know when somebody will take off on a five-minute solo. Or a ten-minute solo. Or a two-minute solo. You need to be paying attention. You need to be alive.

When it's his turn in the spotlight, the drummer is ready. He taps out the children's song, "Mary Had a Little Lamb" on one of his drumsticks.

Tick, Tick-Tick, Tick, Tick-Tick-Tick. Wait. Laughter. Applause.

The other members of the band are there to pick it up. This is exciting. This is a careening roller coaster at your favorite amusement park. And that's why the drummer can't stop smiling: this is fun.

The foundation doesn't open until 1 AM on Fridays and Saturdays, when the bars around town are closing. It draws a mixed clientele. Some are musicians. Most are folks extending their nights with drinks from the first-floor bar and music on the second floor. Some are middle-aged couples searching for a soft curtain to drop on their evenings. Others are college students who want one more drink while they check their smart phones.

The foundation is the only place in Missouri where it's legal to sell alcohol all night, and the loophole makes sense. It's a cultural holdover from the Prohibition era when selling and making alcohol was illegal but parties in the jazz district went all night. Kansas City, led by political boss Tom Pendergast, largely looked the other way when it came to boozing.

The result was a city that became known as the wildest place in America: Paris of the Plains.

Bars, brothels, gambling dens, and all-night speak-easies featured some of the best jazz in America. Musicians who had trouble finding steady work in other cities found plenty in Kansas City.

The reasons behind Pendergast's reach were complex, but an important one was that he looked out for poor and



working-class citizens, particularly in this black section of town—then known as the Bowery. And the working class responded with votes.

The Mutual Musicians Foundation began as a black musicians' union, Local 627, located on Highland Avenue in what now is called the Eighteenth and Vine Jazz District.

Most of the surrounding neighborhoods have been rebuilt through the years. But ironically, the area's central attractions are now remembrances of the past. The Negro Leagues Museum looks at the period when the Kansas City Monarchs were known as the New York Yankees of the Negro Leagues, and the American Jazz Museum remembers

The facade of the Mutual Musicians Club has become an icon in Kansas City. It was prominently featured in the 1979 documentary *The Last of the Blue Devils*.



EXPLORE EIGHTEENTH & VINE

Historically the heart of black culture in Kansas City, the Eighteenth and Vine District was developed at the turn of the twentieth century when housing and neighborhoods in Kansas City were heavily segregated. A city within a city, the area served as the commerce and community center for a thriving African-American community.

Throughout the 1920s, '30s, and '40s it earned the title of jazz district, but during the latter half of the twentieth century, it suffered from hard economic times. However, beginning in the late 1990s, the Eighteenth and Vine District has been revitalized, and now, it's a must-see tourist destination in the heart of Kansas City.

The American Jazz Museum

The self-proclaimed only museum in the world dedicated solely to the preservation, education, and celebration of jazz music, this museum has become central to the renaissance of Eighteenth and Vine. The museum features various exhibits on the subject of jazz and has grown to include legendary venues The Blue Room and the Gem Theater. Keep your eyes peeled for upcoming concerts and events. americanjazzmuseum.org • 1616 E. Eighteenth Street • 816-474-8463

Arthur Bryant's

Located nearby at the corner of Eighteenth and Brooklyn, visit the legendary barbecue restaurant before a night on the town. arthurbryantsbbq.com • 1727 Brooklyn Avenue • 816-231-1123

The Kansas City Blues & Jazz Juke House

A relatively new venue when compared with the Mutual Musicians Foundation, the Juke House brings live music to the area during regular bar hours and is open for lunch and dinner throughout the week. kcjukehouse.com • 1700 E. Eighteenth Street • 816-472-0013

Mutual Musicians Foundation

To visit the Mutual Musicians Foundation, plan on having a late night. The club doesn't open until 1 AM, and things don't really get going until around 3 AM. Expect to be leaving when the venue closes its doors at 6 AM. mutualmusiciansfoundation.org • 1823 Highland Avenue • 816-471-5212

Negro Leagues Baseball Museum

The Negro Leagues Baseball Museum celebrates the legendary players and teams that were segregated from Major League Baseball. Learn the forgotten history of some of the best teams to ever play the game with interactive and traveling exhibits at this world-class museum. nlbm.com • 1616 E. Eighteenth Street • 816-221-1920



The lobby of the Mutual Musicians Foundation is a museum of sorts. Old photos of musicians who have come through the club line the walls, and a vintage piano is on display.

the golden age of American music with a nostalgic lens. Both opened in 1997. Two years later the giant Charlie Parker statue, now covered with a green patina, was dedicated.

The Mutual Musicians Foundation, a pink stucco building with a neon treble clef above the door, is the only thing that has remained the same. In 2007, a change in Missouri's alcohol laws threatened the foundation's custom of serving all night, but the state legislature banded together to allow for an exception.

Earlier in the night, an older man worked on the conga drums: tightening bolts, loosening others, taking a swallow of his drink then finally testing the drums.

He didn't join until everything felt right.

Fingers. Palm. Fingers. Palm.

Anita Dixon first stepped into the building in 1976.

She says she was visiting her father, who lived in Kansas City, and he warned her to stay away from the "dadgum" union hall.

"Of course, I couldn't wait to see it," she says. "When I got there, Big Joe Turner was sitting outside smoking a cigarette."

Big Joe Turner, from Kansas City, had recorded "Shake, Rattle, and Roll," an iconic song at the intersection of blues and rock and roll.

"Well I didn't even know who he was," she says, laughing. "From then on, I was hooked."

The foundation played a pivotal role in her life. Later, when she wanted to go to Lincoln University in Jefferson City, she leaned on the foundation's musicians for help with her entrance essays.

"They made me promise that I'd use my education for the place one day," she says.

That's why she's here. There is love in her voice.

"The Mutual Musicians Foundation was destined to continue," she says.

It's 3:30 in the morning, and Denyse is talking about a young man who just came up the stairs.

"He not only looks like Charlie Parker, but he also plays like him too," she says.

Ernest Melton is eighteen years old, deferential, and unassuming.

He's from Kansas City and, like the jazz musicians before him, the foundation has become his de facto home.

"He's like, 'This is just what I'm here to do in life,'" Anita Dixon says. "He's just got everything that it takes. He has no idea how good he actually is. We call him 'Little Bird.'"

Ernest quietly unpacks his tenor saxophone at one of the tables, leans the case against the wall, and then sits with his head bobbing just slightly to the music. His eyes are laser-locked on the band. He is watching and waiting for a moment that he probably couldn't describe. But he would know it when it happened.

Wait. Beat. Wait. Beat. Wait. Beat. Now.

He grabs his sax, steps up onto the low stage, positions himself behind the microphone, and blows the room away.

There's a large black and white photo on display on the first floor. A panoramic shot, it was taken on May 4, 1930, at the dedication of the foundation's current building. It's a picture that's worth studying. There's a lot going on. The neighborhood looks different, more densely built than it seems today. There are about a hundred people standing in front of the building labeled "Musicians Assn. Bldg. Local 627. American Federation of Musicians."

Some things look planned. There's an American flag on the porch, and the musicians are divided into groups that you can tell apart by their matching suits. There's "Bennie Moten's Victor Recording Orchestra, Kansas City" according to a banner. There's "Paul Banks Rhythm Aces." There are other banners that are harder to read. Shadows show that it was a sunny day. Some men in the back row are holding brass instruments.

Some things are obviously unplanned, though. A couple of wise guys slid their way into the left side of the photo with a sign that advertised a dance the next night. You can read what appear to be the words, "amazing bands" on their sign just behind a parked automobile.

Some men have their hats. Others seem to have missed that memo. And you have to look closely, but there is a person peering out of a second-story window of the building on the left.

The photographer must have set up on the other side of the street to take the photograph. And with so many people involved, it had to take some time to get it all organized. But he knew the moment when it came.

On three. One. Wait. Two. Wait. NOW.

Some things are planned. Some things are unplanned. Some things, like jazz, are a mixture of both.