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**"BRIGHT MOMENTS": THE JAM SESSION AT KEYSTONE KORNER**

By

Michael B. Friedman

The art of the jam session is on display almost every Tuesday night at Keystone Korner. Without a cover charge!

"I wanted to reach the diverse population of Baltimore," Todd Barkan, the founder of Keystone Korner explained. "I wanted to expose them to what Keystone has to offer, to bring together musicians and audiences in a way that is unique to jam sessions, and to share musical bright moments."

At the Keystone Korner jam session, accomplished jazz musicians play tunes from the jazz canon without a score and without rehearsal.

Not all jazz is like this. Big band jazz, for example, is generally fully arranged with interludes of improvisation. Small group jazz is usually rehearsed. Both big band and rehearsed small group jazz can and do have spontaneity, which Barkan says is "the essence of jazz". But a jam session is virtually entirely spontaneous—a special form of jazz.

The Keystone Korner session is led by Obasi Akoto, a commanding bass player, composer, and jazz educator. Each week he assembles a different "house band" to open the session. He says that the jam session begins after they play and members of the audience begin to sit in, but in truth the house band is jamming too. No prior rehearsal. Tunes chosen in a few moments before they go on stage or even when they are on stage. It is a spontaneous joining of fine musicians playing the music they all know and love.

"A jam session", Akoto says, "is a collaboration between professionals and accomplished semi-professionals who are familiar with songs from the jazz canon and can create a cohesive musical experience for everyone."

But for him, a jam session is more than music. He sees it as a major component of the social function of jazz, as a "resolution of tribalism", as a way to heal social division. "It brings diverse people together. Black and white to create community, like flour and water creating dough."

The music at Akoto's jam session is "modern" jazz. It is not Dixie or traditional jazz or swing. It is rooted in bebop, (think Charlie Parker), post-bop (think Miles Davis), hard bop, (think Art Blakey), avant-garde (think John Coltrane after 1960), and fusion (think Chick Corea and Return To Forever). Different styles of jazz joined, Akoto says, "by the use of dissonance to create more consonance".

The tunes played are usually by geniuses of modern jazz. In addition to those named above—Thelonius Monk, Wayne Shorter, Benny Golson, Herbie Hancock, Dave Brubeck, and more.

The players in the house band are among the best in the Baltimore-Washington region, with highly developed technique and a personal feel for the music.

Some evenings, Akoto calls up Anna-Lisa Kirby, a singer who gets the soul of the music and who sings in the spirit of modern jazz, continuing the energy and drive of the session, sometimes with standards and sometimes with wonderful, if obscure, tunes by such jazz greats as Oscar Brown Junior and Charlie Mingus.

Then it is turned over to Todd Barkan, who founded Keystone Korner in San Francisco in 1972. An NEA Jazz Master, he sings "Bright Moments", the lyrics of which he composed for a tune by the late great Rahsaan Roland Kirk. Each week he finds a new twist, but he always dedicates the song and the session to "all the people of the world who never know bright moments".

After Barkan, Akoto opens the session to people in the audience. Typically, he turns the bass over to Ben Merliss, a little known player who can hold his own with the best. And on any given night you never know which major players will emerge from the audience, Sean Jones and Warren Wolf among them. The list of leading musicians sitting in is virtually endless and includes instrumentalists, singers, and a wonderfully energetic tap dancer now and then.

Musicians from around the United States and around the world have brought their musical cultures to Keystone, including tastes of New Orleans, Brazil, and even South Africa. The variety of musicians sitting in sometimes leads the music in unexpected directions. One night, for example, some players brought the spirit of New Orleans to the session and suddenly the band was playing traditional New Orleans jazz with a modern twist, including the no longer hip classic "When The Saints Go Marching In". The place rocked.

In addition to the seasoned professional musicians, students and other less experienced musicians often sit in. The students, mostly from Peabody, are

already professional quality, and the older amateurs cut their musical teeth long ago and know the music.

Want to be part of the remarkable jazz community of Baltimore? Come to Keystone Korner on any given Tuesday and join the celebration.

(Michael B. Friedman is a retired social worker and mental health advocate. He has recently become the house photographer for Keystone Korner. His photographs are on exhibit at the club and on its website—<https://www.keystonekornerbaltimore.com/gallery-1> –and on his website: <https://photography.michaelbfriedman.com>. )