



LIVE AND KICKING

Promoter and one-time recording artist Howard Lee reckons the local music scene is in dire straits – but he's determined to make it better. Dave Freidenrich reports

WHEN IT COMES to live music, many people complain that Hong Kong hits a flat note. Twenty-four-year-old promoter Howard Lee is among those who have bemoaned the dire state of the local gig scene, but unlike most, he has decided to do something about it. Lee, a Hong Kong-born Australian who started playing the drums when he was nine and cut a record at 18, set up his own promotion company, Freelance United Music, and three years ago began bringing in the sort of jazz and blues musicians that he wanted to hear.

He trawled the Australian live-music circuit for talent, found the money to fly in acts, organised venues and promoted the gigs. Although he's had his ups and downs, the young impresario has refused to give in.

And with the festive season in full swing, Lee has brought out two Australian acts to add cheer to live music venues. First up is Sydney-based blues and swing guitarist Ray Beadle, a regular performer in his home town for the past seven years. He will play two shows at the Music Room Live.

Beadle will be followed by Melbourne's New Orleans-style jazz/funk outfit, Jelly Whip, led by incendiary drummer Barnaby Gold. Their sound is akin to the Neville Brothers' earlier incarnation, The Meters.

Sitting in his office, which also serves as a flat and musician's guesthouse, Lee says his mission is to breathe life into a small and unhealthy scene for an audience starved of good musical entertainment.

"I came back [after studying in Australia] because I felt something needed to be done here, musically," says Lee, wearing a black New Orleans Mardi Gras T-shirt. It's a memento of a three-week stay in the Big Easy during Jazz Fest 2002, when he immersed himself in the live scene from 8pm to 6am each day.

"I knew the kind of mentality that existed here. It was like 20 jazz musicians ... and they owned the scene," he says of Hong Kong.

"And they were pretty territorial about it. They were charging some ridiculous rates and they could get away with it because there was

no one else that people could hire. The scene wasn't happening."

Despite his efforts during the past few years, Lee says the jazz and blues scenes have dried up as several venues have closed and a number of local jazz musicians left town.

Brown, in the Mid-Levels, went out of business last year because of a poor location and noise complaints, he says. The Jazz Club, in Lan Kwai Fong, also closed its doors. And another once-popular venue, the Harbour City Courtyard, no longer stages shows.

Lee's first efforts as a promoter went well. He set up 30 gigs in one month with two Australian musicians. From there, he brought in at least two musicians a month.

"I realised that the clubs here don't like flying people out, so I paid for the tickets," Lee says. "The clubs would then say: 'Yeah, we'll have them.' And I would usually play with them, or ask the clubs if we can set up some gigs."

Lee earned enough from promoting to head to the US in 2002 to study the music scene there. After what he describes as a fantastic three-months spent between New York and New Orleans, he came home – and it was "horrible".

The way he saw it, Hong Kong was devoid of the passionate performers he had seen and heard in small, smoky joints in the US.

After organising a few more shows in late 2002, Lee left for South America in February. He planned to be overseas for two months, but when Sars broke out he decided to spend six months travelling in the region. In Brazil he saw lots of carnivals, spent time in Rio and Sao Paulo – the country's jazz capital – and met several musicians, including tango acts, who he says he'd like to introduce to local audiences. But the expense – as much as \$12,000 per musician – makes that unlikely at the moment.

Nonetheless, Lee is considering putting together a proposal to fly out versatile Brazilian guitarist Filo Machado, whose style include bossa nova, and so-called "music popular Brazil" and ja.

"I can't rely on clubs to pay bands any more. The thing is, I have to rely on corporate func-

tions," says Lee, who is bringing out Beadle on the back of an appearance at the Star TV Christmas party tonight. "They [Star TV] are paying for Beadle's airfare and his basic fee. So in order for me to make any money, I have to put on public shows. If I keep the price low, I'm hoping people will turn up."

Some might say that the Harbour Fest, for all its controversy, at least gave music-lovers some ear candy. Lee has no objection to the music. But, like many others, he was less than impressed with the job done by the organisers, the American Chamber of Commerce, under chairman Jim Thompson.

"My advice is to have free concerts set up all over town over a weekend," he says. "As you are spending the public's money, it should be free; at least a portion of it."

"They should have a few top-line acts just to give it some glitz and attract some tourists, but really one or two will do," Lee says.

"It's just amazing that the Hong Kong Arts Festival can bring in top acts and with only a fraction of the budget."

"They were charging some ridiculous rates and they could get away with it because there was no one else"

"The promoters of the top acts should not be subsidised if they lose money. That way, they'll organise things better since it's their own money. Also, they should use actual promoters who have been in the business, and not amateurs like the American Chamber of Commerce."

At this rate, Lee may well be filling Thompson's shoes in the not-too-distant future.

Ray Beadle plays The Music Room Live, 2/F, California Entertainment Building, 34-36 D'Aguilar Street, Central. Tomorrow, 10.30pm. Tickets \$160 at the door. Jellywhip play Club 97, 9 Lan Kwai Fong, Central. Friday, December 26, 10pm. Tickets \$120 at the door. For further information visit Freelance United Music's website at www.fum.com.hk

Blue Door

5/F, 37 Cochrane St., Central, 2858-6555



Veteran newspaper columnist, restaurateur and now-bar owner Lau Kin-wai speaks about his newest venture with unerring honesty. "I wasn't initially even that crazy about jazz," he says, "But I went into Visage Free one night, and a young jazz drummer there named Howard told me that the place was closing down. I also knew that the Jazz Club was changing its focus. I thought, 'What a shame that such an affluent city doesn't even have the generosity of spirit to support a live jazz culture.'" That conversation must have had a big impact on Lau, as he is now sitting in his very own jazz club, watching the 22-year-old Howard jamming away with a bassist and acclaimed jazz guitarist Guy LeClaire. Lau claims that Blue Door is more a labor of love than a business. "The point here is not for me to be making tons of money," he says, pointing out that all the performances are free to the public, that Blue Door is only open when there are live jazz performances, and that the only revenue that comes

in is from the \$50 beers and wines by-the-glass. Though Blue Door is not a particularly money-driven operation, Lau has designed it to avoid that hole-in-the-wall feel. He has totally transformed the space that used to be CE Top with cobalt-blue walls, Chinese-styled flower arrangements and hand-drawn calligraphy from the King of Kowloon. It's basically the same decor as one would find upstairs, at Lau's Sichuan restaurant Yellow Door Kitchen, where Blue Door patrons can order food if they want a bit of dinner theater. For the time being, Blue Door will have live jazz, Fri and Sat, from about 10:30pm-midnight. Call in advance if you are planning a dinner party with jazz.

—Joyce Hor-Chung Lau



JAZZ Hong Kong's Jazz Thing

BY MARK HENDERSON



When I talk about jazz in Hong Kong, I usually mention the closeness and camaraderie among musicians here. I think musicians from abroad are pleasantly impressed with not only the Hong Kong jazz family, but also the friendliness and spirit of cooperation of venue managers.

There are a number of key players propagating Hong Kong jazz; most notably, local drummer Howard Lee. Lee came to town a couple of years ago from Melbourne, and failed to make a rosy impression (cats simply weren't digging him or his playing). He modestly asked, "Is it me or is it political?" He then proceeded to hustle and practice like mad, producing in the end a kind of Aussie jazz crusade; with sorely needed Bohemian type jazz venues such as Visage Free and the Blue Door, which has live jazz every Friday and Saturday. This is Hong Kong jazz at its finest - independent, entrepreneurial types producing new venues, instead of sitting on their asses waiting for gigs at the soon to be defunct Jazz Club.

I will always be impressed with those who present good jazz, create scenes, or put cash in the pockets of those who do. One of these cats is jazz impresario Peter Lee. Trust me, contractors in the music business are hard to come by. This cat, with his weekly late afternoon gigs at Harbor City, mainland expansion efforts, upcoming work with the Hong Kong Tourist Association, and many other jazz periodicals and associations, can't get enough appreciation.

In every jazz scene around the world, there seems to be a turnover or rotation of musicians every two or three years or so. We have had great pleasure in welcoming new additions to our merry jazz family. Mention must be made of cats like Darryl Chen, the wonderful alto saxophonist from Brisbane; Rickard Malmsten, the young and energetic bassist from Stockholm; Jason Cheng, a brilliant young pianist from London; Michael Kurtz, an excellent Be-bop trumpeter from New York City; Tom Nunan, the first-rate tenor saxophonist from San Francisco; and DJ Kulu, the sagacious jazzfunk producer

from Edinburgh.

No matter how tight and loving a family may be, it would be most unusual for it not to be beset with growing pains, obstacles and out 'n' out disease. Lately, the impending closure of the Jazz Club is the talk of the town. Cats (punters, people or musicians), have been writing to the South China Morning Post with their views on the situation - most of them aren't shedding much light, and people are mentioning it to me on the street. Let me first give thanks to Lan Kwai Fong boss Allen Zeman for a relentless campaign of Hong Kong Jazz Club support. Considering Zeman's fourteen years of subsidizing jazz in Lan Kwai Fong, artists and audiences alike should be eternally grateful to the man, instead of being resentful and bitter.

I have found the Jazz Club overall to be friendly, and supportive. That doesn't mean I didn't notice serious if not dire weaknesses. Saddled with a club bogged down by unimaginative, status quo orientated middle and upper management, cemetery staff, and unrehearsed or boring acts, it's been a long movie. There can be tremendous difficulties in running a jazz club; to compound that with errors and neglect such as inappropriate break music, or the same CDs and videos played over and over again for six months, or scowling staff behind the bar, or the tired format of one overseas artist backed by local cats, or the unfair lack of rotation of artists on weekends...

We were lucky, or at least those who made money from the club were, that Zeman put up with it as long as he did. As far as those enlightened punters offering hopes of Brown's alleged new venue, and some soon to be announced new venue... hmm, we'll see. As far as Ned Kelly's goes, something's lacking; there must be a better way. Right now, for straight ahead jazz, The Blue Door is carrying the village vanguard, with the Howard Lee Trio featuring Dave Packer and Sylvain Gagnon. It's got the underground, fresh buzz and it's homemade; all the ingredients of the Hong Kong jazz scene that I love.