

The Jazz Museum in Harlem

by Jamie Cosnowsky

Harlem conjures up a lot of images for people. But when you step off the subway at Lexington Avenue and 125th Street, any of those notions disappear as you see the renewal all around and the thriving community that's busy shopping and site-seeing. Another sort of renaissance has taken place over the last ten years and the gentrification of New York City has embraced Harlem and the surrounding area.

The brownstones have been restored to their gorgeous grandeur and on 126th Street between Park and Lex, you will find the non-descript offices of The Jazz Museum in Harlem. I entered the second floor office and was immediately greeted with a warm smile by Executive Assistant, Wilhelmina Grant. Executive Director, Loren Schoenberg, is an animated sort and sharp to boot. His enthusiasm and ebullience partnered with his purity of purpose to have the best jazz museum located in Harlem, has brought a single idea to life...in a morphed sort of way. Schoenberg generously shared the journey of The Jazz Museum in Harlem and spoke about his vision for the future.

"The Jazz Museum in Harlem began as the brainchild of Leonard Garment and he put together a group of people who thought there should be a jazz museum in Harlem. There had been a jazz museum in New York; a place called The New York Jazz Museum. A guy named Jack Bradley ran the day-to-day operations and I worked there as a high school volunteer. I was aware of the fact that there had been a jazz museum and it folded in the late '70s and that ended that. So Len Garment and his friends figured that there should be a jazz museum, and if there's going to be a jazz museum, it should really be in Harlem because the idea resonates here in a way that it really doesn't resonate anywhere else. They raised some money and spent a couple of years trying to get it together and for whatever reason it just didn't work. Most of the Board was out of town; the Executive Director at that time really didn't have any support to speak of. At the same time that the original try at the jazz museum disintegrated, a few months later, Len's attempts to help Congress make an appropriation to the jazz museum came to fruition.

And Charlie Rangel, Pat Moynahan and Senator Ted Stevens and John Warner and a whole bunch of people from across the political spectrum got together—there was \$1 million to figure out what a jazz museum in Harlem should be. That's when I came aboard. So I was hired in 2001 and in 2002, I opened up this office in Harlem. I had a few goals: They were to try and win back the dis-affected members of the Board and of the jazz community that hadn't been very impressed in the first go-round. The second thing was to start actual programming;

That was at the very beginning, so at least I felt that there were people who had bought into the idea and felt engaged with what we were doing.

At that point, we engaged Ralph Appelbaum Associates. Ralph is one of the leading exhibit designers in the world and basically I spent a long time and a lot of the money that we had earned, and rightfully, helping them translate into musicological terms what the Jazz Museum in Harlem was going to be. How we were going to tell the story and how the exhibits would be created; translating what the underlying

philosophy would look like in museum terms. So for the next few years we spent a lot of time and finally came up with a document in 2004 that really shows you precisely what it was going to be. This version of the Jazz Museum was a 40,000 sq. foot space that was going to be part of the development of the Victoria Theatre which is next to the Apollo Theater and it's been dark. The State was trying to do there was done at Columbus Circle with Time Warner Center, which is a pretty standard model of a multi-use facility these days. Cultural component—married to a hotel—married to condos. So that's what they wanted to do at the Victoria. All I can tell you is that it's now March 2007, and they

still haven't made the designation as to who's going to get the idea. But we spent a lot of time figuring out how we would build this big museum. We're still in one of the two final presentations, although the size that we have there isn't 40,000 sq. feet anymore— it's much smaller. It was kind of a blessing in disguise because in the interim, while we were waiting in 2002, 2003, 2004-5-6-7 for the Victoria Theatre to get straightened out, we morphed into this community organization. We started with a program called "Harlem Speaks" in 2004 which is a bi-weekly series in which we interview (myself or Christian McBride, or Greg Thomas) people who somehow have an intersection with jazz and with Harlem. They don't have to be musicians — the bulk of the people that we interview have been musicians, but lesser known people who haven't been interviewed to death by everybody. But we've also had Clark Terry, Roy Haynes, Charlie

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Loren Schoenberg, Wilhelmina Grant and Christian McBride

to start doing things to engender some community support. The third thing was to figure out what a jazz museum was actually going to be: What was going to be in it and how were we going to tell the story? I had been involved to varying degrees with Jazz at Lincoln Center and with the Ken Burns jazz project among other things, so I had had some experience with what I like to call the petty dis-functionality that arises in all niche communities. We had gotten a chairman's grant from Dana Joya at the NEA at this time to put together a planning conference, so in late 2002, we assembled a group of about 25-30 people from all over the campus—from Jason Moran, to Jimmy Heath, to Dan Morgenstern, Victor Goines, to Alfred Appel, to Francis Davis, to people to WBGO, The Smithsonian, The Library of Congress, Jazz at Lincoln Center, academics, musicians—all different kinds of people. And we met for three days and came up with a consensus about exactly what it was we should do.

Courtesy of Jazz Museum of Harlem

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Rangell and Kareem Abdul Jabbar. Architects like Max Bond—fascinating people. That's every other week and it's video-recorded professionally. The quality of the video is equal or superior what you see on PBS. We've done 70 or 80 of them so far or more. Out of that came the Harlem Speaks Educational Initiative which is a for-credit program that we do in the public schools in which we bring some great elders into the schools to meet the kids. There's a performance—we've had Grady Tate, Melba Joyce, Joe Wilder, a dancer named Tajah. Right now we're meeting at the Museum of the City of New York and we have adjunct programs in a school in the Bronx and Queens. On Alternate Thursdays, we have a program called "Harlem Swings" which are free concerts that we do at the Nubian Heritage located at 126th Street and 5th Avenue. Every Friday, we're down at the Rubin Museum of Art with a series we have called "Harlem in the Himalayas," with an incredible line-up of people! It came about because Leonard Garment met with Donald Rubin—a man who had been successful in business. He retired and started a museum. Most wealthy individuals who start museums, they turn into vanity projects. It was obvious that the Rubin Museum was something else—it was A-1. It's stunning. The cultural programming is excellent. I went to meet with Mr. Rubin and at first we couldn't find what the common denominator was, but we came up with "Harlem in the Himalayas" and it stated a little over a year ago and it's been running mostly weekly and we've had everybody from A to Z. It's not one style or one genre—it's everybody. Solo guitar, to big bands, to avant garde, poetry—they've all been there. That's been really good because people come from all around the world, all around the country and the state—they come to Harlem to be tourists. The one group of people who don't come yet, are New Yorkers. It is very strange, but it's a fact. So consequently, a whole bunch of people—New Yorkers who won't come to Harlem, will go to "Harlem in the Himalayas" at the Rubin. Saturdays we're in the schools and there's also our Children's Band that we do at the Ella Fitzgerald Foundation on Thursday nights. We're about to launch two new programs: "Jazz For Curious Readers" which I'm going to do with the New York Public Library, and "Jazz For Curious Dancers." There's an audience who loves Swing Dancing, so we're going re-introduce it to people; really introduce it taking the high road.

So, we've morphed into this organization with several thousand people a year coming to our events, without a permanent home! We're trying to find a home. We'd like to have a building where we can have our offices, our collections — we have some of Ralph Ellison's things, we have an Ellington Collection courtesy of one of the past Presidents of the Duke Ellington Society which makes us one of the premier Ellington Archives in the world.

We have a link to the community here that is priceless on a human level. I know that we're doing

the right thing because of the people that come to the events and from what we're all learning. It's really a two-person operation: It's me and Wilhelmina Grant day-in and day-out. Christian McBride's my Co-Director and he's our traveling ambassador. Christian does interviews all around the world in which he mentions the museum so that's priceless. Between the three of us and my Board of Directors, we've got a great team!

If I could wave a magic wand, we would have a great exhibit space at the Victoria Theatre where people would go and have their socks knocked off and say, 'Whoa! They've brought jazz to life!' And then they'd say, 'Yeah, but I want more than that,' so they would walk out of the theatre and walk over to Lenox Avenue where our home is and participate in the education programs, and make records themselves. We're going to have a recording studio for people to work; we'll have a small exhibit there; all our collections; our archives and our offices. Now, if we can just get the rest of the New Yorkers up to Harlem...

The Jazz Museum in Harlem is having their first major fundraiser that is open to the public on June 7th at the Cue Art Gallery, located on 511 West 25th Street in Chelsea. Remember to bring your dancing shoes. For more information on the Jazz Museum in Harlem's fundraiser or programming, visit www.jazzmuseuminharlem.org, or call 212-348-8300. ■

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JJ: Unless you want to play just like Sonny Rollins.

JA: Unless you want to just play exactly like that, but everyone has a different theory about this and I tend to think that saxophone players do more of this and follow this regimen a little more than say guitar players. 'Cause I've even spoken to Jim Hall, who's one of my mentors without studying with him. He's just somebody that I love what he did. And I remember when I finally met him and we got to talking and I said, "Well, I never really transcribed a whole lot. Did you?" He said, "No." He said he took one Charlie Christian solo when he was really young and maybe a few bits and pieces of chord voicings and stuff and then he figured it out. And he did a lot of playing. And look how he plays. I mean, god, it's fabulous. It's beautiful. And what I learned listening to him, another words of wisdom thing, was just like how he constructs a solo. It seems to have so much logic and compositional elements in it, yet he was able to play quote unquote "licks" that sounded like vocabulary of jazz. So he had enough of that in him and he took that and went further. To me, that's what I've always based playing on, following your own thoughts, your train of thought, being spontaneous, but you have this reserve. You know what works. You know what arpeggios are; you know what scales are. That's all well and good. You have to know that.

JJ: There's a picture of you and John in *The New Real Book* of you and John playing together

JA: Or laughing together. We did some gigs together around the time we did the record. We were spending a fair amount of time together. And we were out in California and I remember we put together, somebody put together, a little tour for us. And I think that's where that photo comes from. I think it comes from playing at The Great American Music Hall or one of these places, probably a sound check. I know the photo you mean, just laughing hysterically at something, because he's got such a great sense of humor. He probably just was cracking me up. He always did.

JJ: Talk about this video that you did with Andy LaVerne and your rapport in making music together.

JA: That thing's been out for about six months and I haven't seen any kind of mention of it. I've seen an ad for it from Mel Bay Records. It's interesting that Mel Bay is known for guitar-oriented DVDs and CDs and what-have-you and books, of course. We all, as a kid I studied from Mel Bay Books one, two, and three and then I just threw them away, and they were very helpful. But Andy was actually the one that initiated this project, 'cause he knew somebody at Mel Bay. I think it was Corey Christiansen, one of the guitarists and also works for Mel Bay. I don't know how they came together, anyway, he suggested to Corey about doing a project with me and him, whether it was a CD or a DVD. And Corey jumped at the idea. It was actually Andy, who's a piano player who actually initiated this idea for a guitar-oriented label. And Andy and I have known each other since my years at Boston—I don't think I was in Berkeley anymore. We used to just play jam sessions. And we both moved to New York around the same time. And we found ourselves again playing jam sessions and hanging out. And at some point, he asked me to play on one of his records. I forget—he was recording then for a label, DMP. And Andy asked me to play on one of those records with him and Eddie Gomez and Peter Erskine and various other people. So anyway we did that and shortly thereafter, there was a chance to do a duo record. And both Andy and I were complete admirers of the Bill Evans/Jim Hall records, *Undercurrent* and *Intermodulation*. We were fans of those records plus we were individual lovers—me of Jim and Andy of Bill and vice versa. So it seemed like a natural thing for us to record a CD.

This is an excerpt from the comprehensive interview in the following issue of Jazz Improv Magazine.

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