

The Beat

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Uptown Swing

The National Jazz Museum in Harlem continues expansive programming

The National Jazz Museum in Harlem has seen steady growth since arranger-conductor-historian Loren Schoenberg became executive director in 2001 after the United States Congress provided \$1 million for development. The following year the fledgling organization moved into its current office on East 126th Street, and in 2005 Christian McBride came on board as co-director. And Schoenberg's recent plans for this New York institution that saxophonist/attorney Leonard Garment founded in 1997 are increasingly ambitious. "The programming we've been presenting has been growing exponentially," Schoenberg said.

Case in point: Throughout December, McBride hosted a weekly series called Christian's Listening Party, which featured him discussing his career, including the evolution of his bands, his film work, his favorite recordings and his appearance in all-star settings.

"We're getting more support from subscribers, and word has spread throughout the community more in the past year than at any other time in the five years since I've been on board," McBride said.

The Listening Party took place at the NJMH Visitors Center, which is open to the public and presents seemingly nonstop educational and cultural activities. McBride likens it to an intimate club. The events include the Harlem Speaks series featuring artists and business leaders, Jazz for Curious Listeners sessions discussing jazz fundamentals, Jazz for Curious Readers sessions related to the written word, and the Saturday Panels series of films, discussions and music.

NJMH has also spread its wings beyond the space itself, on the second floor of a nondescript building a stone's throw from the aboveground 125th Street Metro North train station. It sponsors live programming, including the Harlem in the Himalayas series at the Rubin Museum of Art in the Chelsea neighborhood—which was the setting for Schoenberg conducting the NJMH All-Star Big Band in archival Duke Ellington music (including tunes the band never



National Jazz Museum board chairman Arthur H. Barnes (left), Christian McBride and museum executive director Loren Schoenberg

COURTESY NATIONAL JAZZ MUSEUM IN HARLEM

recorded) as well as "The Far East Suite" on Dec. 18—and at The Players club in Gramercy. In April, NJMH will begin a new Friday night series at the Dwyer Cultural Center in Harlem, with an emphasis on jazz-related dance music that the museum hopes will attract younger audiences.

In addition, NJMH hosted a panel on the early jazz-related writings of author Jack Kerouac, hosted by Kerouac scholar Sarah Villa, and Jonathan Batiste launched the new NJMH performance series, *Jazz Is: Now!*, which features the pianist and his band playing and interacting with the audience.

"We're a good team," Schoenberg said. "We've had several thousand people attend our programs that take place 52 weeks a year. But we need more room. We cram some 70 to 100 people into our events."

In 2002, the NJMH began its search to find another space to expand with a listening library and performance theater. After being stymied in its attempt to take over the shuttered Victoria Theater next to the historic Apollo Theater on 125th Street, last March the museum was chosen to be part of a major redevelopment project in Harlem, at the long-vacant indoor marketplace Mart 125 across the street from the Apollo.

While the Victoria Theater project involved a

21-story development of hotel rooms and condos with the museum occupying a 10,000-square-foot space on the fourth floor, Mart 125 will also be 10,000 square feet but more accessible. "So we're going to take that sprawling novel we were going to write and compact it into a novelette," Schoenberg said.

With support from the city government augmented by a major capital campaign, the \$15 million project is scheduled to open in the spring of 2012. Even with the current economic downturn, Schoenberg is encouraged: "City agencies have signed off on this, and they want it to happen now. Even in these dire times, a modest cultural program can flourish." He adds that the Nov. 24 fundraiser at The Players featuring Batiste and vocalist Grady Tate raised \$150,000.

In a statement when the project was announced, NJMH board chairman Arthur H. Barnes enthusiastically said that soon "everyone will have even more of a reason to take the 'A' train to a corridor" that has historically played such a major role in the development of jazz.

"Jazz is such an important part of Harlem, which is where the music evolved," said Schoenberg. "That's why we want the museum to be a catalyst and cultural anchor for the community. Jazz is not a conventional music. It's an experience."
—Dan Ouellette