Moon Jazz: Keeping America’s music alive in Evanston

by Chris Gillock
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Prairie Moon Restaurant on Chicago Avenue in downtown Evanston. Credit: Prairie Moon Facebook page
Back in the “before times” (aka the pre-pandemic era), Evanston hosted free jazz performances every night of the week at Pete Miller’s Steakhouse. Pete Miller’s was managed by Rob Strom for many years, and Chris Anderson briefly tended bar at the restaurant under Strom’s leadership. Anderson’s brother, Scott, booked the musicians for several years until he left in 2008.

The 25-year run of jazz programming at Pete Miller’s came to a halt in August 2019 – the restaurant closed abruptly, leaving 42 loyal employees without jobs and the Chicago jazz community without a treasured venue. The owner of the building that housed Pete Miller’s found a new tenant. Reza’s, the Persian restaurant from Chicago’s Andersonville, wanted to open in Evanston. COVID delayed the opening until September of 2021, and Reza’s entertainment offerings are limited to belly dancers on Friday nights. Low-cost daily or weekly jazz music performances in Evanston seemed to be gone forever.

Since they were avid jazz fans, Strom and the Anderson brothers refused to accept this fate. Through their efforts, Moon Jazz launched on Wednesday nights in March 2022 at Strom’s Prairie Moon restaurant at 1635 Chicago Ave. in downtown Evanston.

**Strom’s involvement with jazz**

Strom told the RoundTable he grew up in a musical family – his father was a clarinetist with an extensive jazz record collection. His mother and sisters were all vocalists. Jazz was the soundtrack of his household when he was growing up. Strom is a lifelong Evanston resident, arriving shortly after his birth 60 years ago. He graduated from Evanston Township High School in 1981. His four older sisters are also ETHS grads, and three of them still live in town (the fourth slipped across the border into Wilmette).

After high school, Strom headed to the East Coast to attend college. After sampling a couple of academic environments, he returned to Evanston. As he pondered his options, Strom started working for the late Steve Prescott at the Davis Street Fishmarket.

Prescott launched Evanston’s restaurant renaissance in the mid-’80s via his business, the Clean Plate Club, which operated Davis Street Fishmarket, Tommy Nevin’s Pub, Merle’s Barbecue and Pete Miller’s Steakhouse. Restaurant work appealed to Strom, so he entered the culinary and hospitality program at Kendall College to prepare for a career in the field.

Strom became manager at Davis Street Fishmarket, and eventually took over as president of the Clean Plate Club when Prescott died. He also worked on the design and operation of Pete Miller’s.

He presided over the annual Jump & Verve Jazz Festivals that filled Evanston’s streets with music and jazz fans in the late ’90s. Artists such as McCoy Tyner, Stanley Turrentine, Paquito D’Rivera, Kurt Elling,
Dee Dee Bridgewater, Orbert Davis, Dr. John and Edgar Winter all performed at the festival.

“There were 5,000 people in the street for the first Jump & Verve festival,” Strom said. “The performances were so wonderful.”

Strom left the Clean Plate Club when Prescott’s family sold the business to a new ownership group. He was ready to start his own business, and his restaurant, Prairie Moon, opened in 2002.

Reuniting to bring jazz back to Evanston

As Strom was working to open Prairie Moon, Chris Anderson was moving deeper into the jazz community. Anderson is an avid drummer and music promoter/advocate. He became acquainted with Strom when they both were part of the Clean Plate Club team. Anderson became the primary booking agent for Nevin’s Live, the Evanston music venue that was next door to Tommy Nevin’s Pub for a few years.

After the music space was converted into a sports bar in 2004, Anderson became the general manager of the Green Mill Tavern, Chicago’s iconic jazz club. He spent more than 11 years at the Green Mill, working closely with the musicians who played the club and managing day-to-day activities. He’s now operations manager for the Fulton Street Collective, an arts incubator in Chicago’s West Town neighborhood.

In addition to managing the various arts events at Fulton Street, Anderson curates the jazz performances in the incubator’s music venue. Anderson also books music for several other venues in Chicago and the northern suburbs. When the pandemic hit, Anderson produced and broadcast jazz performances of Fulton Street jazz artists every night on the organization’s YouTube channel. His efforts led the Jazz Institute of Chicago to give him the Irma Pickens Jazz Advocate Award.

Anderson’s brother, Scott, was also part of the Clean Plate Club team. Scott Anderson handled marketing for the Evanston restaurant group for several years. He is now an independent marketing consultant for restaurants, bars, festivals and entertainment venues in the Chicago area. His clients include both Prairie Moon and the Jazz Institute of Chicago.

The Anderson brothers and Strom saw an opportunity to expand the reach of Fulton Street’s jazz program while increasing the amount of jazz performed in Evanston. They launched a dual project at Prairie Moon to establish a mid-week jazz residency. Prairie Moon and Fulton Street both contribute staff to oversee the events, and Scott Anderson handles promotion of the Moon Jazz program. An outstanding group of emerging and established jazz players have played at Prairie Moon since the Wednesday night series began.
Prairie Moon, an American restaurant in downtown Evanston, hosts live jazz performances every Wednesday night. Take a look and learn more to the tune of a quartet led by saxophonist Pete Fucinaro of Kansas City. (Video by Seeger Gray)

While many players are busy on the weekends, Wednesday nights tend to have fewer gig opportunities. The Chicago jazz community is showing up again to play in Evanston. A $7 cover charge goes directly to the musicians – Prairie Moon and Fulton Street do not take a cut.

The low price point is purposeful – the Moon Jazz team wants to make sure that potential audience members aren’t discouraged by a high ticket price.

The team at Prairie Moon is pondering the possible re-launch of an outdoor jazz festival in Evanston. Strom has had preliminary discussions with the City of Evanston. “We’ll see what happens,” he said.

**Adding jam sessions to the mix**

Earlier this year, Scott Anderson approached Strom with an idea. There were no jazz jam sessions in town, yet Evanston is full of young (and not so young) musicians that might show up if a venue hosted a session. Both ETHS and Northwestern have aspiring jazz players who need a place to play and learn. Strom agreed to devote Prairie Moon’s first Thursday evening each month to a classic jazz jam with a skilled trio backing up the jammers. The leader of the jam is an excellent bassist, Clark Sommers. He is supported by two talented students from Northwestern’s Jazz Studies program – Chase Wilkins on drums and Brendon Harper on piano.

Jazz jam sessions are an important source of education for jazz musicians. Studying music theory and instrumental technique is necessary, but there is no substitute for playing with other professionals. The Thursday night jam is off to a great start, with over a dozen jammers and an appreciative audience for the first two sessions in February and March.
The Moon Jazz series has caught the attention of Chicago’s jazz players. Saxophonist Greg Dudzienski and his quartet played their first Moon Jazz gig on March 13 to an enthusiastic group of jazz fans.

“I have done some work with Chris Anderson in the past,” said Dudzienski. “I heard about this series at Prairie Moon and asked Chris to get me a slot. I love this space – it is intimate, and the audience is very attentive.”

Moon Jazz just celebrated its second anniversary.

“Wednesdays at 9 p.m. can be a tough sell, but there have been nights when the place is packed,” Strom said. “All in all, we’re very happy – it’s our busiest late night of the week. But we can always accommodate more folks!”