



The Late, Late Show

AT AN AFTER-HOURS JOINT IN
KANSAS CITY, THE JAZZ AGE LIVES ON.

Photograph by Lisa Vosper

"This couple showed up from Omaha around 11 the other night," Betty Crow told me over the phone. "We didn't know what to do with them, so we put 'em downstairs, let 'em watch TV." She continued. "We open at 12, band starts at 1, they play till 5, and I'm here until 6."

Crow's organization, the Mutual Musicians Foundation, is housed in a nondescript two-story building in the heart of the old 18th and Vine district of Kansas City, Mo. The area has gone through the classic iterations, from thumping vice district during the Jazz Age to ghetto divided from its white neighbors by the grim euphemism "urban renewal." In the past decade it has undergone a renewal again, this time more hopefully, with the American Jazz Museum and the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. But the curatorial spirit hasn't quite stretched to Highland Avenue, to the Foundation, as it's known locally — and if Crow has her way, it never will.

Crow met me at the Foundation's doorstep just before midnight. She is in her late 70s, with tufting red hair, eyeglasses and a murmurous voice about nine parts molten brass. "It's a pretty nifty place," she said. "It's young people, old people, people from around the world, black, white, Chinese. Everybody comes. That's why we like it." The Foundation started life as Musicians Protective Union Local No. 627, established in 1917. Local 627 was a serious organization, taking the musicians' side in professional disputes, but it was also a locus for new sound in the evolution of jazz. The Kansas City style was harder, bluesier, more raucous. It gave the world Mary Lou Williams, Jay McShann, Count Basie, Big Joe Turner, Lester Young and Charlie Parker, all of whom made their way through Local 627. By 1930, the union had more than 300 members, its own home and a tradition of all-night jams.

"It's 3 o'clock when things really start to jump," Crow warned, looking me over dubiously. If it's her mission to preserve something of jazz's original essence — as gutbucket bordello music, an accompaniment to the crossroads of sex and criminality — can I say she has done a bang-up job. The Foundation is both a place people come to from all over the world and a place to which many people will not go; it is, in other words, both a temple and a Godforsaken dump. The first floor is a dreary mélange of wood paneling, Formica counters, linoleum floors. (I kept waiting for Piper Laurie to hobble in and murmur, "Light me, stranger.") The only evidence of veneration are the photos of old union members lining the walls. "We still only know who about 40 percent of them are," said Ray, Crow's "entry control" man, a low-key African-American with a tight salt-and-pepper beard. "There's Bird," he said, pointing at a young Charlie Parker. "They laughed at him in K.C. They didn't think he could play. He showed 'em. *He showed 'em.*"

The point of the Foundation is not to sit in mummified reverence of a Great American Art Form. The point is to get bombed, listen to loud music and dance. "Up until two or three years ago, we operated as a speakeasy," said Crow. "We didn't have a liquor license, but we were selling alcohol, having a good time." When the city's vice squad finally cracked down, outcries arose from all over the globe. The state legislature passed an exemption, and now the Foundation is "the only place you can get a drink between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. in the state of Missouri." Every Saturday, a house band plays upstairs, across from the bar. It's made up of baby-faced kids, many from nearby farm country, who come to study at the university's music conservatory. As the clubs close down, musicians wander over and sit in with

the band.

Crow was right. By 3 a.m., the place was jumping, filled, as one elder statesman put it, with “every species of American.” (By my own lazy taxonomy, I saw equal parts Jersey Shore, “The O.C.,” “Family Ties” and “Straight Outta Compton.”) Upstairs the band was smoking through “Jordu.”

The real action, however, was downstairs, the boozy-woozy way station between the entrance, the stairs and the suspiciously well-trafficked bathrooms. A bottle blonde in a too-tight denim skirt stabbed furiously at her cellphone. The elder statesman, in a red satin shirt and a derby, sat in judgment of the playing above. (“College thang,” he said, shaking his head. “When I came here, it wasn’t *college*. If they didn’t feel you were right, they sent you back. ‘*You ain’t ready yet.*’ Now you just come in here and play.”) The blonde had transferred her digital fury to the downstairs piano, a white lacquer job on a tiny stage, upon which she set about marauding “Heart and Soul.” (“What key you in, honey?” asked the elder statesman. The blonde only cackled maniacally.) At 4 a.m., with the cathouse atmosphere fully ascendant, a young trombonist from Sioux Falls looked around the room and mumbled wistfully to no one in particular, “It’s too bad you didn’t see this place before they cleaned it up.” ■

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THE MUTUAL MUSICIANS FOUNDATION
(ANIMATED PORTRAIT BY TINA BERNING)