



jamming at the black dog

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photography by JEREMY ENLOW

A brisk music jumps out of an underground club in downtown Fort Worth, a hurried rhythm that seems to trip over itself and land with grace. Note by note, it draws you in closer: the organic sound of jazz.

Sunday night at the Black Dog Tavern, 903 Throckmorton St., creates a spell all its own through the talk, the laughter, the perfume, the smoke, the beer and sweat all simmering like a stew on a restaurant range brought to a sustained moment of bliss through the tenders and accents of musical instruments.

"There's always that element of risk involved, which is nice," Carter said.

Since 1997, musicians have gathered for jam sessions at the Black Dog to kick back, improvise and have fun. This gig isn't about the money — it's about freedom, it's about risk and reward, about finding a common ground.

And audiences have responded. Each Sunday evening, the tavern is filled to capacity with college kids, downtown professionals and live music fans who bring their friends, roommates and significant others along to listen.

"People always need one last place to have fun before their week



FEELING THE VIBE / Both amateur and professional musicians gather at the Black Dog for informal jam sessions that are nothing short of spectacular. Audience members are entertained by the classics of the swing and be-bop eras.

Musicians who play there never rehearse. Often times, they've never met prior to playing. Music just comes as it comes — in the moment, on the spot. Black Dog is known to lure out-of-towners, fresh from playing a show at Bass Performance Hall, looking for a place to unwind, knock down a few and belt out some melodies. Part of the joy each weekend is just seeing who will show up, said Joey Carter, vibraphone player.

"It's the one gig a week where we're not taking anyone's orders. It's our chance to relax," Dave Carnes, a jazz drummer, said.

It seemed odd to hold a late-night jazz lineup on Sunday evenings when most people are interested in getting to bed early. Michael Pellechia, who founded the group, knew the audience was out there. They, as much as the musicians, just needed a place to congregate and socialize, he said

starts," Pellechia said.

Pellechia, like most of the jam session regulars, was classically trained and has worked as a freelance musician and instructor around the Metroplex for decades. Several session members are University of North Texas jazz school graduates. Others are products of East coast music conservatories.

This past spring, however, Pellechia, who plays clarinet and flute, stepped down as session leader



ANYONE IS WELCOME, ALMOST / Although there is no set musical set and the performers change on a nightly basis, there is one constant to the place—you better know your stuff if you dare step up to the mike.



and appointed Carnes to take over. Pellechia said he was leaving Fort Worth to be closer to family in his home state of New Hampshire.

In those eight years, jam sessions survived for consecutive Sundays without very much direction, led mostly by the musicians' love for the music and desire to show up, Pellechia said.

"Sometimes I scratch my head and wonder how it's lasted so long," he said, jokingly.

Jam sessions occurred through a chance encounter between Pellechia and Black Dog's owner, Tad Gaither, in mid-1997. Gaither had bought the site of the old Blarney Stone, which had vacated the space and moved to another location. Gaither intended to create a cozy neighborhood pub but had no intention of featuring live music.

Gaither liked the idea of a jam session and in October 1997 Pellechia and other musicians moved in and set up for Sunday nights. Starting out was tough. For the first six months, session members played to a tavern that was mostly empty.

Eventually, word of the group began to spread among downtown locals looking for a classy, night-spot to chill. The notion of musicians giving away jazz for free also attracted the local college scene. The venue has since turned into a nest for Fort Worth night owls. Even now, some patrons stay up for jam sessions that go past 2 a.m.

"It tends to draw a wide variety of people," said Dana Sudborough, who also sits in on vibes.

As part of the freewheeling musical lineup, session members allow musical passersby to sit in.

But for those Charlie Parker try-hards out there, be warned. There is no open-mike night. Black Dog members are pit bulls when it comes to quality control. Session members play the classics of the swing and be-bop eras. Those who don't know the essentials usually don't get to play.

"If a guy walks up and says he 'just wants to jam' and doesn't know any specific tunes, that usually sends up a flag," Carnes said.

Musicians who play the Black Dog weekly said they've seen their own abilities improve. Playing week after week strengthens one's "jazz chops," helping his or her skills stay strong and the art form stay vibrant and alive, Carter said.

"You only learn what works when you do it in front of people," he said. ■