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Jazz on a summer's evening
New York's coolest clubs

The Big Trip

**New
York's
got its
mojo
back**



From Blue Note to Woody Allen, jazz was the soundtrack of New York. It went quiet for a while, but the joints are jumping again. Singer Tessa Souter offers an insider's guide

Going to Minton's Playhouse was like going to church," says legendary jazz vocalist Sheila Jordan, who moved from Detroit to New York in 1950, famously following Charlie "Bird" Parker. "Everybody came. Miles, Bird, Monk, Dizzy, Billy Taylor... you name it. We'd all take the A Train up there after the other clubs closed," she says. The original club on 118th Street in Harlem was where bebop was invented after hours, and all the musicians came uptown at 4am to jam and hang out until 10am. "The kitchen was great," recalls pianist Kenny Barron, who played there with Freddie Hubbard and Sonny Rollins. "It had the best collard greens and fried chicken."

Before it closed down in the 1970s, most of the world's top musicians had performed there. "We called it 'Cadillac Alley'," says singer Mansur Scott, who grew up in the neighbourhood and hung out at the club during the 1960s. "They'd be lined up around the corner on weekends, when all the rich people came uptown and mingled with the players, pimps and hustlers to hear the new music. You never knew who you were going to rub shoulders with."

Cadillacs no longer line the now quiet street where the club's multicoloured neon sign (the same one that remained lit up every night during the entire 30 years the club was closed) beckons in the darkness. The bar that used to be on the corner is now a convenience store and most of the area's clubs and speakeasies closed down years ago. The walk from the 2 and 3 subway stop at Lenox and 116th Street is dark and desolate, even though the abandoned buildings and brownstones I remember from just

nine years ago are now outnumbered by the newly restored ones. And if you want chicken and waffles, you'll have to go to Amy Ruth's Home Style Southern Cuisine, open 24 hours on weekends, a couple of blocks away at 113 West 116th St.

But inside Minton's, which reopened in April, the welcome is friendly if not exactly jumping on a Monday night at 10pm. The long polished wood bar has just a few locals slouched near the front door and there are exactly three tourists sitting at the tables and chairs in front of the stage at the back of the room, where the Eli Fontaine trio is playing. But it's early yet – especially for Harlem where, at all hours, you might come across a group of little girls skipping rope in the street and old men in vests sitting on the brownstone stoops, or on plastic kitchen chairs, shooting the breeze or playing dominoes and chess.

Around 11pm, the place begins to warm up when a young couple starts swing dancing on the black and white checkerboard floor. A little later, Cantrese Alloway – complete with red magnolia in her hair – sings a couple of standards to enthusiastic cheers. As I am leaving at 12.30am, I run into the owner, Earl Spain, just turning up for work. Jo Telford, from England, and bassist Mickey Bass have also just arrived and we stand out in the street chatting. A young man with a trumpet greets us as he walks by to join the jam session, which starts seven nights a week after the first set. A few minutes later, three cab-loads of young tourists appear and pile into the club.

"New York was always a jazz mecca," says Mickey Bass, who first performed at Minton's with Kenny Durham and Jimmy Heath when he was 19 years old.

New York is still a jazz mecca. And, although there's no longer a club

on practically every corner from downtown East and West Village to uptown Harlem, all packed to the gills at all hours, it's still the best place on earth to be a jazz fan. You can't walk a block without tripping over a world-class jazz musician.

And it is entrancing. I moved here in 1997 as a features writer. One rainy night, I sat in on a jam session at St Nick's Pub in Harlem. Another night, organist Brother Jack McDuff offered to accompany me mid-song, bumping the other pianist off the stage to

Everyone in the bar, including the waitresses, defiantly dance the night away underneath signs that read 'No dancing'

Way to go

Getting there

Continental Airlines (0845 6076760, continental.com/uk) flies direct to Newark from seven UK airports from £435 rtn inc tax in high summer; £243 from September.

Where to stay

The Algonquin Hotel (thealgonquin.net) hosts jazz nights in its Oak Room. Rooms \$200 a double. On a budget? Jazz on

wild applause. By 1999, I'd ditched journalism to pursue a full-time career as a musician.

At the time, the New York jazz scene was in transition, with many clubs closing and others complaining of empty houses. But now it appears to have got its mojo back, and the other Saturday night a friend and I took in several jazz clubs, one after another, all within walking distance of each other, all of them filled with jazz lovers of all ages.

The steep staircase leading down to the Village Vanguard is lined with people trying to get in. The small room, crammed with wooden tables and chairs, with a huge tuba hanging on the wall surrounded by yellowing black and white photographs of the jazz legends that have played there, is unchanged since it opened in 1933. Down the road, the recently reopened and totally refurbished Smalls (once a "dark hole" to quote one musician) is now a beautifully decorated space with recessed lighting and oriental rugs strewn on the tiled floor. It's no longer open until 8am, but with a \$20 cover (which includes two free drinks) to hear a hip saxophone-led quintet, it is just as crowded as it has always been.

Around the corner at the 55 Bar, a

Harlem (jazzonthepark.com), a hostel housed in a Victorian brownstone, has dorms from \$25.

Further information

nycvisit.com
Country code: 00 1.
Flight time London-New York: 7hrs.
Time difference: -5hrs.
£1 = 1.79 dollars.

lower ground floor speakeasy-style den hung with Christmas lights and decorated with old LP covers and photographs, a mixed crowd is chatting and drinking and listening to the blues. A little further down Seventh Avenue South, people are spilling out on to the street at Sweet Rhythm (formerly Sweet Basil) where bassist Buster Williams and Blue Note-signed wunderkind Stefon Harris are playing to a full house.

Over on Houston Street, we run into Chilean singing star Claudia Acuna, who is hanging out in front of the Zinc Bar where it is Brazilian night. She hurries off to Sweet Rhythm when we tell her Buster Williams is playing. Incidentally, the Zinc is one of the best late night hang-outs in town on Mondays, when guitarist Ron Affif holds court and Roy Hargrove and George Benson regularly sit in – the jazz bargain of the century for only a \$5 cover. Tonight, it is crammed with Brazilian jazz lovers of all ages, some of them trying to samba in the cramped front room where the band is playing. In the back, where the music is piped in from the front of the house, the crowd lounges in Kasbah-like booths.

We walk over to Grove Street to end the night at Arthur's Tavern, a total dive, where the likes of free jazz pianist and poet Cecil Taylor (who often starts out his evening at the 55 Bar) and Sweet Rhythm club owner James Browne, go to "de-jazz". A stellar funk band is playing in the back of the room where we, along with everyone else in the bar, including the waitresses, defiantly dance the rest of the night away underneath signs on every wall that read "No dancing". It is broad daylight when I get home at 6am.

● Tessa Souter performs at the Edinburgh Jazz Festival August 3 and at Pizza Express, Dean Street, London August 6 and 7.



Take the A train: New York's jazz clubs

Uptown

Minton's Playhouse

208 118th St (+212 252 9377).

St Nick's Pub

The definitive down and dirty dive with an eclectic array of musicians every night. Monday night is jam night all evening, but most nights end with a jam. Free beans and rice, salad and chicken are served.

773 St Nicholas Blvd (+212 283 9728).

Lenox Lounge

Billie Holiday sang in the back room and Malcolm X ran the numbers when he was still Malcolm Little. Then it had a 1940s Egyptian mural; now it's called the Zebra Room, repapered in zebra wallpaper. Tourists and music lovers pay to hear the music. Boozy bar in the front attracts locals.

288 Lenox Ave (+212 427 0253, lenoxlounge.com).

Bill's Place

A speakeasy-style venue on a famous block once known as "Swing St" because it was full of after-hours joints where the likes of Billie Holiday sang. Bring your own booze.

148 West 133rd St (reservations swoman@juno.com), Fridays and Saturdays.

Cleopatra's Needle

A pub-like bar with music seven nights a week. Most nights end with a jam. Wynton Marsalis drops by from time to time to sit in with the young players from his orchestra who perform there. Middle Eastern food.

2485 Broadway (+212 769 6969, cleopatrasneedle.com).

Smoke

A tiny, cosy club with booths and a different style of music every night.



SUMMER SOUNDTRACK

From the Hot Afternoon

Sultry version of Milton Nascimento's song, from Dave Brubeck's alto-saxophonist Paul Desmond. *From the Hot Afternoon* (Verve, 1969)

Twilight Song

Lyrical bluesy, bossa-esque romance from pianist Kenny Barron. *From The Perfect Set Live at Bradley's II* (Universal France 2005)

Moon and Sand

The best arrangement of this song I've ever heard. From Chet Baker's perfect Chet Baker Sings and Plays. *From the Film Let's Get Lost* (BMG/RCA 1989)

If You Never Come To Me

Sinatra's uber-soulful version of a little-sung Brazilian classic. *From Francis Albert Sinatra & Antonio Carlos Jobim* (Reprise Records, 1967)

Lover Man

Spooky, atmospheric arrangement of the old jazz chestnut with Geri Allen, Dave Holland and Jack DeJohnette providing

Blue Note

Popular tourist destination with big names during the week and up and new comers on cheap Monday nights. It can be uncomfortably crowded. 31 West 3rd St (+212 475 8592, bluenote.net).

Sweet Rhythm

Newly refurbished with sleek wooden walls and an airy modern feel. Musicians like Russell Malone and Kenny Barron often drop by for a drink and to check out who's playing. Cho is the best jazz barman in town. 88 Seventh Ave South (+212 255 3626, sweetrhythmny.com).

Fat Cat

Couches and comfy chairs. Attracts a much younger crowd, both playing and in the audience. Bring your own booze. No food. 75 Christopher St (+212 675 7369, fatcatjazz.com).



p) . . . Lenox Lounge; Theolonius Monk, Howard McGhee, Lenox Hill outside Minton's; Tessa Souter plays Jazz Standard



Attracts a mostly young college crowd. It's just opened a new kitchen. 2751 Broadway (+212 864 6662, smokejazz.com).

Midtown

Birdland

A tourist destination, named after the original Birdland on 52nd St, where jazz giants as well as up-and-coming players pass through. Musicians coming to check out their friends mostly hang out at the bar but it is a proper restaurant with tablecloths. 315 West 44th St (+212 581 3080, birdlandjazz.com).

Iridium

Popular with tourists. Go down a steep staircase to a small room with tables arranged in rows and a tiny bar. 1650 Broadway (+212 582 2121, iridiumjazzclub.com).

Jazz Standard

Large bar at the back and a long line of tables facing the stage. Food, from Blue Smoke upstairs, is the best barbecue in the city.

116 E 27th St (+212 576 2232, jazzstandard.net).

Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola

Part of Wynton Marsalis's Jazz at Lincoln Center. Very glamorous and expensive. Fabulous food. Big drinks. Beautiful room with huge picture window overlooking Central Park. Big names play there, including Marsalis himself. Time Warner Building, Broadway at 60th St, 5th Floor (+212 258 9595, jazzatlincolncenter.org/dccc).

Downtown

55 Bar

55 Christopher St (+212 929 9883, 55bar.com).

smallsjazz.com).

Village Vanguard

178 Seventh Ave South (+212 255 4037, villagevanguard.com).

Jazz Gallery

Off the beaten path loft performance space but worth the trek. Wine is served for a "donation" of \$3. Chairs and tables lined up in front of the stage. No distracting waiters or cappuccino makers. A fantastic listening room.

290 Hudson St (+212 242 1063, jazzgallery.org).

Knitting Factory

Rabbit warren of separate rooms and bars on different levels with different prices, as well as a bar where there is no cover charge. Mostly avant garde jazz. 74 Leonard St (+212 219 3132, knittingfactory.com). **TS**

If you can't make it there, try... the new Ronnie's

Music venues tend to come and go or fall from grace as scenes and tastes shift. But Ronnie Scott's club has been the hub for the jazz scene in Britain for nearly 50 years.

The club, started by saxophonist Ronnie Scott and fellow musician Pete King, originally began in 1959 in what was a cabbie's rest room on Gerrard Street in London's Soho. Scott was beguiled by the exotic modern jazz sounds he heard coming out of the US. However, Musician's Union restrictions meant American performers couldn't play in Britain. In the 1960s, Scott initiated an exchange programme, whereby a British artist could play the States in exchange for an American visiting the club, even though the performer – be it Sonny Rollins, Roland Kirk or Yusef Lateef – couldn't bring their own band (members of the Ronnie Scott's house band had to fill in). For the first time in Britain, the jazz greats could be seen and heard live. In

1965, the club moved to larger premises in Frith Street, where it remains today.

After Scott's death in 1996, King continued to run the club, until he finally decided it was time to sell it on.



In 2005, Sally Greene, a jazz-loving theatre impresario behind the Old Vic and Richmond Theatre, bought Ronnie's. The club reopened a fortnight ago after a subtle makeover by Parisian designer Jacques Garcia – Greene prefers to call the changes enhancements rather than a refurbishment. The look is still very much the same – the terraced seating, low key table lighting and sophisticated supper club feel remains. But the bar has moved to a more convenient position, the banquettes are comfortable. The food has also been given a much needed overhaul and a new magazine launched. And the music? No change there: just the best jazz acts from around the world, including over the summer: David Sanborn, Chick Corea and Wynton Marsalis.

47 Frith Street, London W1 (020-7439 0747, ronniescotts.co.uk).

Martin Skegg