



Tom Manuel is a jazz musician and educator and also the president and founder of The Jazz Loft. (Photo by Judy Walker)

## All that Long Island jazz

By: Adina Genn February 21, 2020

To see live jazz is to witness collaboration in motion.

There's the deep communication between performers. Individual moments spotlighting each musician's chops. Flashes of appreciation among the players, where you know — they got this.

This spirit is embedded in everything about The Jazz Loft in Stony Brook. From its robust performance calendar, curated exhibits, educational component, and community outreach, there is always something to see.



The Jazz Loft is housed in an historic building in Stony Brook. (Photo by Judy Walker)

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Always something to hear. Always something to learn. A business success story even for this nonprofit centered around the American art form of jazz.

All of this is thanks to Tom Manuel, who spearheaded the effort in 2014, though he's quick to point out that it takes a village.

"I'm not a businessman — I'm a jazz musician and an educator," said Manuel, a trumpeter, and also the jazz artist in residence at Stony Brook University. "We have this nonprofit run by myself, and a board that brings a lot of different backgrounds."

But the arts are serious business for the region, even when emanating from a nonprofit. The arts account for 21,891 paid positions and generated \$1.5 billion in economic activity, including almost \$1.8 million in payroll compensation and nearly \$380 million in non-employer receipts, according to recent census figures.



At The Jazz Loft, the Arthur Prysock exhibit highlights the late Searingtown resident's career. (Photo by Judy Walker)

The Jazz Loft is housed in a historic building, a property of the Ward Melville Heritage Organization, and was once a firehouse. With that partnership, the Jazz Loft has what would be an enviable setup for many performance spaces. It has a 49 year lease, paying a \$1 a year. The arrangement allows Manuel to focus on the music.

And the business side almost operates like the art form itself. Manuel credits the people on his board — yes, there are those who can write checks, but also those with budget and fundraising experience. And then there are the devoted volunteers armed with backgrounds in public relations and fundraising.

"It's the great lesson of jazz," Manuel said. "The collective comes together in unity, respect and support."

The formula also involves listening and patience, he said.

And there's "always a little risk involved to make for a great performance."

Still, it's never been without pressure.

Initially, that meant raising funds to renovate the building into a performance venue, education center and museum. And the need to fill seats never goes away.

But since its early beginnings, with The Jazz Loft's band of supporters, things always seemed to fall into place. And throughout, Manuel has made sure to extend a helping hand to his community — whether musicians, business owners or other stakeholders — so that they can thrive together.

And as Manuel put it, “Sadly, we don’t have any competition. There is no performance venue committed to this art form.”

But Manuel, who had long been a collector of authentic jazz memorabilia, is someone who thinks outside the box, whether it was building out the space, filling seats, or cultivating people’s curiosity about jazz.

Take the third annual Swing Into Swing Festival, which this year runs from March 24–March 28. On festival nights, one could stand outside any one of the participating restaurants and hear bits of jazz drifting from the eateries.

This makes sense to anyone who knows Manuel.

“He is promoting the idea that a healthy community also has a healthy arts” scene, said Jane Taylor, the president of Stony Brook’s Chamber of Commerce.

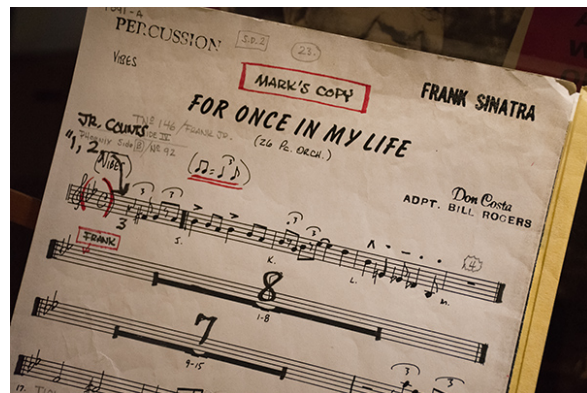
Created by Suffolk County Leg. Karla Hahn, in partnership with Manuel, and with \$10,000 in grant money from the region’s hotel and motel tax, the festival aims to attract tourists and music lovers to Stony Brook’s historic business district. The grant money goes towards paying musicians and for marketing support. Events take place not only at The Jazz Loft, but also at local eateries, including Pentimento, Sweet Mama’s, Country House, and The Three Village Inn.

“We wanted to bring artists into our restaurants” so people would “come out and enjoy the music and learn about the jazz and then come back again” Hahn said.

The festival takes place in March, “at a time when people are home because it’s cold,” she added. “We’re hoping to get people to come out.”

To attract new audiences, The Jazz Loft brings in performers from the South Shore so that their following can discover the venue.

And there’s an educational component in which the high school jazz community can come in to perform so that they have “the opportunity to play in a nice space,” Manuel said.



On display at The Jazz Loft is the first published sheet music of “For Once in My Life;” this was the score Frank Sinatra used with his big band in the 1970s. (Photo by Judy Walker)



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## Outside-the-box thinking

Manuel has a history of discovering opportunities others might have not recognized. It starts back decades ago when he hung out with “old timers” at “all-star” concerts, who played with famous guys.”

“I was in my 20s and 30s; they were in their 80s and 90s,” Manuel said. “I borrowed memorabilia. Friendships developed, and the guys started giving me stuff. Sadly, when they passed away, families gave me stuff.”

Over time, he archived so much memorabilia that a Newsday reporter wrote that all Manuel needed was a museum in which to house it. That led to a dialog and ultimately an arrangement with the Ward Melville Heritage Organization.

Manuel spearheaded a fundraising campaign to renovate the building, and trade unions donated services and materials. Everything helped, leading to a half-million dollar renovation, making The Jazz Loft what it is today.

“It was a total grassroots effort,” he said.

After a year of renovation and fundraising, The Jazz Loft opened its doors in 2016. Then came the pressure of filling seats. But as word spread, audiences liked what they heard, and returned.

During the first year, “if we had 40 to 50 people a show, I was happy, and thought, “This is good,”” Manuel recalled. “Year two, we were always having 40 to 50 people, and sometimes 75, and thought that was good. Year three, we always had 75 to 100. Now there are events that often sell out.”

And that may be a nod to some of the region’s richest jazz moments. Seventeen miles away is the Dix Hills-based John Coltrane Home, where the artist wrote his masterwork, “A Love Supreme.” And over the Queens border is the Louis Armstrong House Museum, an intimate setting where visitors, Manuel noted, “feel like they’re walking through the guy’s house.”

The Armstrong venue has served as inspiration.

Part of the draw is the exhibit space. Current visitors see the The Keely Smith Room, which includes Smith’s Grammy – which she earned in 1959, the year that the Grammy’s were first awarded; she and Louis Prima had earned “Best Performance By A Vocal Group Or Chorus” for their song, “That Old Black Magic.”

The Arthur Prysock exhibit highlights the late Searingtown resident's career. And there are original scores, record collections and instruments in virtually every nook and cranny of the space. Exhibits rotate, bringing yet another reason to return, and some performance programs complement the exhibits.

But Manuel also wanted to accommodate the performers, so they too would return again and again.

"We really designed The Jazz Loft to celebrate the artist," he said.

Because performing around the country can be arduous, Manuel focused on making the space a home, with a sound system, bass and piano so that no performer has to "schlep equipment on the train," he said.

"That's what makes you stand out" as a venue, he said. "It makes The Jazz Loft very special, and the musicians feel appreciated, genuinely."