

Jazz in the Alley celebrates history, rebirth

by Georgia Geis

Great events in history often are not planned; they just happen. Bronzeville's Jazz in the Alley just happened. In the late 1950s, jazz DJ and mechanic Arthur "Pops" Simpson and his friend Little Chuck used to spin their favorite records — the likes of Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Charlie Parker — in the garage where Simpson worked at 50th Street and Champlain Avenue. Word spread, and every Sunday more people came out, totting their records.

"[Jazz in the Alley] started as some guys playing their records all day Sundays," said Maggie Brown, daughter of the late musician and poet Oscar Brown Jr. "It was a gathering spot."

This summer the tradition is being revived for the 4th annual Jazz in the Alley in the Valley series. The concert takes place on the second and fourth Saturdays through September at 3 p.m. behind the New Approach Health Food restaurant and store, 641 E. 47th St.

Many of those performing in the series remember the original alley. Hyde Parker Jimmy Ellis at age 25 was the first to introduce live music to the alley.

"One Sunday I decided to take my sax along," said Ellis, who lived around the corner from the garage.

It soon became a regular thing on Sundays to have live jazz jam sessions as well as DJ battles, with whole families from small children to seniors spilling out into the alley outside the garage. The festivities lasted until dusk — and sometimes into the wee hours.

"A lot of people want to give me credit for starting the alley, but others were responsible," Ellis said. "I just started the live music."

Bronzeville resident and drummer Bernard Williams, Jr. was seven when his father, a boogie-woogie stride piano player, first took him to the alley. He remembers a Black man playing "Body and Soul" on his horn. Williams got to see many of the legendary jazz greats like Duke Ellington at the Sunday affair.

"The Regal Theater would have stage shows and sometimes between the matinees or at the end of the night the musicians would go to the alley and jam," Williams said.

Hundreds — according to some accounts thousands — would show up on Sundays to listen to music and gossip about the neighborhood.

"It was very informal, not organized," Ellis said. "It became a tradition."



Siddha Webber got more actively involved in the alley in the late 1960s. After being inspired by the nearby "Wall of Respect" mural created in 1967 by a group of local artists called the Organization of Black American Culture, he approached his friend the late Mitchell Caton to paint a mural in the jazz alley. Caton went on to become one of the most prolific and well-known mural artists in the country, garnering international fame for his pioneering work.

"I defined myself as a person while doing this painting," said Webber, who involved local young people in the making of the mural.

Webber wrote a poem entitled "Universal Alley" in the center of the mural. There was an argument about whether the mural was called "Universal Alley" or "The Rip Off," which Caton named it.

"Caton wanted to focus on the gang violence, depicting people up against a wall and guns," Webber said.

Webber said the attendance to the alley peaked after the completion of the mural.

"It became a really hip, magical type of hang out," said Webber. "For me, it was sacred."

It was shortly after the completion of the mural that Ellis said the alley started to decline due to increased gang activity and food vendors without permits trying to capitalize on the popularity of the event.

A jazz vocalist in her own right, Brown said she remembers her father talking about performing during the early days at the alley.

"The Alley in the early days filled a natural need, a desire for camaraderie. Then when it gets put in the context of money, it changes," Brown said.



These historic photographs are courtesy of Jimmy Ellis, who captured the spirit of Jazz in the Alley through his lens. Circa late 1950s.

Above left: Children play in the alley at 50th Street and Champlain Avenue.

Above: Entranceway to the garage where it all began, visible on the left end of the photo.

Below: Residents gather throughout the alley.



In the early 1970s following a nonfatal shooting, Mayor Jane Byrne closed down the Alley. Ellis and some of the other regulars moved the music scene to a vacant lot just down the street. It was at one of these jam sessions that Brown performed with her famed father.

"I remember seeing a picture of Daddy and me playing there," Brown said.

In the late 1970s, there was another reincarnation of the Alley tradition when long-time Bronzeville resident and film student the late Oshunyoni Mugwana started the annual one-day festival also called Jazz in the Alley. This yearly event was considered a neighborhood festival and Chicago Park District provided a stage and PA system.

Williams, who taught Mugwana film, recalled one year when Jimmy Spinx, a South Side actor of "Car Wash" fame, was the master of ceremonies. Other celebrities to take part were saxophonist Ari Brown and Sherry Scott from Earth, Wind and Fire. The annual event continued for twenty years into the early 1990s.

Webber and Ellis approach Mugwana about bringing back the festival after a handful of years passed with no Jazz in the Alley. She did not want to organize it and, according to Webber, did not want to relinquish the name. This was the birth of the newest formation of the tradition of Jazz in the Alley. "In the Valley" refers to the name locals used to describe the neighborhood.

Ellis said he believes the new series "captures the original spirit."

Brown, who has performed several times for the series, agrees.

"It feels very communal there," Brown said.

"[It] feels like we are a community when we are there."

Jazz in the Alley in the Valley will feature Diva night this Saturday with such performers as Diane Ellis Band, Delores Scott and Kuki Boatwright. New Approach offers a special menu for the event, including salads, sandwiches and veggie juices.

For more information, call 312-263-1649.

Left: Arthur "Pops" Simpson, "Little" Chuck and friend get together in the alley