



History of Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club

For Ronnie Scott and Pete King, the dream finally came true on Friday October 30th, 1959. That was the day they opened their jazz club in basement premises at 39 Gerrard Street, in London's Soho.

The dream had started taking shape some 12 years earlier when Ronnie, then 20, a highly promising tenor saxophonist, blew his savings on a trip to New York to see for himself what the jazz scene there was all about.

For a young jazzman from London, particularly in those early post-war years, it was like reaching Mecca. Because of Musicians' Union restrictions, British jazz addicts in the late 1940s and 1950s had virtually no chance of hearing American jazzmen in person. And to hear them even on record meant paying out vast sums for imported 78 rpm performances of Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker and the others.

For Ronnie Scott, it was "a fantastic experience." He'd never really heard an American group as such in a proper club atmosphere. The nearest experience had been some informal

London sessions featuring musicians from the Glenn Miller and Sam Donahue bands during the later war years.

Scott took in most of the New York clubs during his two-week stay. When it was finally time to return to London, the seeds of ambition were well and truly sown within his mind. He was high on American music and basked in the tremendous impression that the Three Deuces and the other clubs had made on him. There were other trips across the Atlantic, with the inevitable visits to the local jazz clubs.

There was one especially memorable night when Ronnie Scott heard the great Charlie Parker Quintet with Miles Davis at the Three Deuces. Playing next door was the Dizzy Gillespie Big Band and, late into the night, Davis sat in and blew with Gillespie. The atmosphere was electric and Ronnie Scott carried on dreaming his dreams of setting up a similar kind of club in London.

39 GERRARD STREET

Scott hit his 32nd birthday early in 1959 and he and fellow tenor saxophonist and personal friend, Pete King, started looking round for suitable premises to establish a club and came up with 39 Gerrard Street, Soho.

For a while it had been used as a kind of rest room for taxi drivers, and had occasionally, as a tea-bar, also been a haunt for local musicians. To begin with, the plan was simply to provide a place where British jazz musicians could jam.

A loan of £1,000 from Ronnie Scott's stepfather helped Scott and King meet the immediate commitments once the lease was signed. They took out a small advertisement in Melody Maker to announce the grand opening performance: "Tubby Hayes Quartet; the trio with Eddie Thompson, Stan Roberts, Spike Heatley. A young alto saxophonist, Peter King, and an old tenor saxophonist, Ronnie Scott. The first appearance in a jazz club since the relief of Mafeking by Jack Parnell". The long-time Scott policy of mixing jazz ideals with light comedy relief was already showing through.

AMERICAN MUSICIANS' BAN IS FINALLY LIFTED

For the first two years they were booking the best of British modern jazz musicians but had problems getting work permits for American instrumentalists because the Musicians' Union attitude towards visiting jazzmen was still tough.

Then, a vital development came in the Scott-King decision to fight for the right to present a top American jazzman. Pete King was the chief negotiator with the Musicians' Union and the American Federation of Musicians. There had been a few concert exchanges (involving, for example, Stan Kenton and Louis Armstrong).

But the end product of King's long meeting with the MU and the American Federation of Musicians was the lift of the blanket ban on American musicians, provided an exchange deal was involved, so that work in the United States was provided for similar British players.

The Tubby Hayes Quartet went off to play the Half Note Club in New York - and the great Zoot Sims was booked in for a four-week residency at Ronnie Scott's club, November 1961. Ronnie Scott's club was the first to offer engagements to American musicians in a club setting.

Zoot Sims trail-blazing session paved the way for guest appearances by other American tenorists, including Johnny Griffin, Roland Kirk, Al Cohn, Stan Getz, Sonny Stitt, Benny Golson and Ben Webster.

There were also visits by Bill Evans, Wes Montgomery, Freddie Hubbard, Donald Byrd and Art Farmer to name just a few. Please see the attached list for a more comprehensive roll call.

THE MOVE TO 47 FRITH ST

The appearance of such jazz giants really put the Club on the map and the fortunes of the enterprise improved to such an extent that King and Scott had to go in search of bigger premises.

In the summer of 1965 Scott and King found the ideal place, at 47 Frith Street, only a short walk from the "old place". Where £1,000 had covered the bulk of the expense of setting up the original premises, they were now faced with having to find around £35,000 to convert and decorate the new hall.

Financial aid was forthcoming from top promoter Harold Davison, a friend and keen jazz fan. The last American to play at the "old place" was tenor saxophonist, Benny Golson.

The euphoria of being able to present in person some of the legendary names in jazz did not cause Scott and King to neglect their objective of providing a good working environment for British jazz musicians. They kept the "old place" in operation (running at a loss) until the lease expired in 1967 so that the younger British jazzmen could continue to have an opportunity to play and develop.

In the spring of 1968 it became possible to extend the Frith Street premises by acquiring the building next door. This enabled Scott and King to add an upstairs room where pop-type acts could be showcased and also the addition of a downstairs bar. The new enlarged club opened in October 1968 with the Buddy Rich Band and an augmented seating capacity of 250.

In the booking schedule there has always been space left for artists such as Tom Waits, Linda Lewis, Elkie Brooks, Eric Burdon, Paul Rodgers, Jack Bruce and recently the Notting Hillbillies, featuring Mark Knopfler. Acts not exactly within the jazz field but nevertheless part of the unique "atmosphere" of the club that has always been so important.

Perhaps inevitably, because of its reputation, the club has also been the location for many music videos, feature films, T.V. shows and national radio programmes. And in recognition, in 1981, Scott received the OBE for 'services to jazz'.

There was also the setting up of an Agency, B.P.R. Ltd., once situated above the club, now located in Romford, booking acts out and a 32 track in-house studio and in-house record label called Jazz House Records, the catalogue of which is now available on the club's own Web site.

Scott and King were also responsible for making it possible for Cuban musicians to perform in the U.K., starting in the early eighties with the likes of Irakere and Arturo Sandoval and also co-hosted Cuba's jazz festival in Havana in 1993.

IN MEMORIAM

Then some of the light went out of British Jazz on December 23rd 1996. Ronnie Scott at age 69 unexpectedly died. A long-time heavy smoker, Scott suffered from considerable ill health during his last two years. A thrombosis and two operations on his legs, before he suffered teeth problems.

For a saxophone player teeth troubles can be a disaster. He was advised to have teeth implants, a painful and time-consuming course of treatment, which if successful can be very effective. Scott expected to be out of action for about a year but there were unforeseen complications, which extended the time he was unable to blow and practice.

The final straw was when they came to put the top teeth in and the bone structure wasn't large enough to take them. He started to drink Brandy coupled with the ultra strong sleeping tablets prescribed by his dentist, although most of his life he had been teetotal. This dangerous combination was eventually to cause his untimely death. Despite the speculation in the press at the time, due to the fact that Ronnie did sometimes suffer from depression, the coroner's verdict was Death by misadventure.

THE NEW MILLENNIUM

After the death of Ronnie Scott Pete King ran the club successfully for another 9 years, seeing the club reach its landmark 45th anniversary. However it was never the same for Pete without Ronnie and in June 2005 Pete sold the club to theatre impresario Sally Greene.

Introduced to Ronnie Scott's by her father when she was in her teens Sally Greene has been a regular in the club for many years. It was her reputation of restoring and maintaining the tradition of some of London's oldest theatres that persuaded Pete she was the right person to take the reins. Sally's first move was to appoint Pete as the club honorary lifetime president and Leo Green as the artistic director. In June 2006 the club reopening after a three month refurbishment under the direction of renowned Parisian designer Jacques Garcia. Since the reopening the club has hosted some of the biggest names on the world jazz scene including Wynton Marsalis, Chick Corea, David Sanborn, Kenny Garrett, Billy Cobham and many more. Sally Greene's aim is to ensure the survival of this great institution for another 46 years...