

A walk down Jackson Street: Seattle's jazz legacy

By Sidh Shroff, Daniel Colindres-Flores and Rediet Giday, with support from Lucas Galarneau, for *RadioActive Youth Media* | July 2023

PODCAST TRANSCRIPT:

[Sounds cars and people on Jackson Street fade in]

SIDH: Hey, this is Sidh.

DANIEL: This is Daniel.

SIDH: And we're here at the historic intersection of 23rd and Jackson Street. A while ago in the 1900s, there used to be a lot of jazz in this area and now, let's take a look around. What do you see?

[Sounds of Jackson Street fade out and jazz music fades in]

REDIET: Welcome to Jackson Street. I'm Rediet Giday, with Sidh Shroff and Daniel Colindres-Flores on this podcast from Radioactive. It's a program at KUOW where teens learn to create radio stories. In this walk, we will explore the rich history of jazz on Jackson Street. A vibrant hub of musical expression that shaped Seattle's cultural landscape. But why is any of this important?

I believe that music and artistry is an effective vehicle for any change in this world today. And I remember wanting to learn more about jazz. I mean it was the greatest form of resistance in African American communities. Black people were neglected for so long, but they never stopped making music. It was the one thing they knew couldn't be ignored.

And so I remember my AP art history teacher teaching me more about jazz. One day he sent me away with a book called "Jackson Street After Hours," and that's when I was really drawn to jazz and its history. Here's Sidh with his take on jazz.

SIDH: The rich history contained in this music lives on today, in the jazz music I've played on my bass. But this precious history has started to disappear as Jackson's historic buildings have been replaced by apartments and malls, leaving Jackson's legacy endangered in its aftermath.

So, close your eyes, and let's go back in time.

[Jazz music fades in]

REDIET: Jazz in a way was hidden, even at its peak in the late 1930s and early 1950s. Famous artists like Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Oscar Holden were so very limited in how far their music could go and where they could play.

This is because of laws at the time that in a way barred African American people from playing their instruments in certain places. Only very selective people were allowed to do so, those that were quote unquote “good enough.”

But how did jazz find its way to the streets of Seattle? To answer that question, we must step into the intersection on Jackson Street, where it all began.

Here, we uncover the fascinating stories of migration, cultural exchange, and the transformative power of music that brought jazz to this very spot.

Here on 23rd and Jackson, Kevin Buster, the lead player of the Golden Earrings Jazz Band shows us where jazz music thrived.

KEVIN BUSTER: “I know that there was a lot of jazz going on in the hotels of Jackson Street. And I've met a few musicians that were, like, part of that scene, that were here. Dave Brown was one of them, and Floyd Standefer was one of my teachers at my high school for just a second. I know that Ray Charles played on Jackson Street and Quincy Jones.”

REDIET: But what made this music so special? Now here’s Daniel.

DANIEL: Prohibition, or a ban on alcohol, swept the country in the early 1900s and touched down in Washington in 1914. This drove alcohol consumption underground to nightclubs. With these nightclubs came jazz music, and there were plenty of jazz clubs on Jackson Street to fuel that jazzy nightlife.

SIDH: I talked to jazz trombonist and jazz teacher from Mercer Island High School David Bentley about the prohibition and its effects on jazz.

DAVID BENTLEY: “During Prohibition, I think, the club owners would pay off the police. And so the police would sort of look the other way in terms of alcohol. And I mean, I do think music a lot of times accompanies a festive environment, and sometimes a festive environment involves alcohol and other stuff going on.”

REDIET: Any bribes that were happening were unintentionally contributing to something greater. And if anything, in secret they allowed a space for jazz to still breathe.

[Jazz music fades out, sounds of a speakeasy fade in]

In places like Seattle's Black and Tan club, alcohol flowed like oxygen and jazz raged on hotter than a wildfire.

[Champagne bottle pop and more jazz music begins]

REDIET: The Black and Tan Club was a haven from the oppressive world outside. In the comfort of Seattle's Jackson Street, here, talented jazz musicians including the likes of Oscar Holden and Ray Charles breathed life into Black culture. Through powerful rhythms and free melodies, it offered an escape from the oppressive world outside.

[Music continues]

REDIET: While, yes, it still had its place in this city, the spirit of jazz no longer carries that prominence it once did. What was once a blaze through the streets of Seattle has come to a smoky standstill. A lot has changed, when it comes to the production of jazz now.

Let's go back to Sidh and Daniel on Jackson Street

[Sounds of people bustling on Jackson Street]

SIDH: Let's take a look around. What do you see?

DANIEL: Well, I see this abandoned looking store with like, two really cool neon signs. Like it's like a musical note and some guy playing like a saxophone.

SIDH: Yeah, no, it's really interesting. I mean, like one half of it looks like it's like a lot older and then there's, there's another half here where a lot of like the older architecture and older influence seems to be gone. I don't know, we have like a big Amazon Fresh store which is pretty new, I'm guessing.

REDIET: What Sidh and Daniel saw is a new version of Jackson Street. Not lifeless, but different. Today, the street is dominated by apartments and shops instead of clubs, the sounds of busses and cars instead of jazz music.

And jazz music in general has changed a lot since then too. Here's Daniel, who talked to a local jazz musician.

DANIEL: I spoke with Kevin Buster, the lead member of the Golden Earrings Jazz Band. And he talked about how the movement of jazz is a little slower now.

KEVIN BUSTER: "The old-time musicians that were passing stuff on, like, when I was growing up, are all dead. And I mean, there are a few people picking up the torch, but like, I definitely feel like not very many people like go check out the past of jazz. It's like, they get into what is

commonly done at a jam session, which is very modern. And like, they'll play songs that are based on songs that they don't even know."

[Jazz music begins]

REDIET: So, Jazz music has started to stray away from its historical roots in Seattle. But there are still so many people that care for this music and its history.

Daniel and Sidh conducted interviews across Seattle about jazz and its impact on them today.

DANIEL (on tape): What does music mean to you, what's your connection to music?

BRIAN JONES: "Well, it's a pathway to the soul. It's both the rhythms and the melodies and all that, that involved in how you manufacture a song and stuff. And it does things to you that nothing else does."

KENDRA MULIAGATELE: "So I started with Gil Scott Heron. And then from there like John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Etta James. So yeah, from there, I kind of just took a deep dive into jazz and I'm really in love with not only like, the musicality of it, but also like the storytelling behind it. I'm in love with the saxophone. I love anyone who can play a sax."

REDIET: From fans to musicians, these voices paint a vivid picture of the jazz community's impact on the city. Maybe, there's still hope to preserve the legacy of Jackson Street, and the culture it brought to Seattle too.

Back to Daniel and Kevin Buster.

KEVIN BUSTER: "If you go to any antique store, you can find pictures of old sheet music with like, Black people painted in the most like, caricature, ugly way. And like, I feel like, it's important to go see that to like, understand how racism existed and kept people down. And this music came out of that, like it, it was like a seed planted deep in muck that grew out of that. And like, that's part of the beauty of it is that it, it grew from this ugly thing."

REDIET: You know, to me, I think that Black musicians found solace and unity within that vibrant jazz scene that in a way flourished out of something very ugly at the time.

KEVIN BUSTER: "You may not be able to really understand racism in America without looking at jazz and jazz history. And I feel like it's every American's duty to understand what happened. So that it doesn't happen again, and so that we can make some changes."

REDIET: And just like the jazz scene from Jackson Street, jazz in Seattle reflects the lifestyle of people today.

Back to David Bentley.

DAVID BENTLEY: “You know, a lot of it, I think has to do with Seattle being Seattle. It's this beautiful place, and it has this vibrant arts community. And we're surrounded by mountains and water and rivers. And I think that the pace of life, if you compare it to the east coast, is more laid back and kind of more easygoing. And I think that appeals to a lot of people. I kind of think the jazz scene sort of follows that vibe a little bit.”

REDIET: While the heyday of jazz on Jackson Street may be a thing of the past, the spirit of this musical genre continues to thrive in Seattle today.

[Golden Earring Jazz Band playing music at Pike Place Market]

REDIET: As we near the end of our journey, it's time to reflect on the incredible tales we've uncovered and the enduring impact of jazz on Jackson Street. The rhythm and soul of this neighborhood will forever be intertwined with the history of jazz in Seattle.

I mean Daniel, what did you feel when you were there?

DANIEL: I felt like a lot of the art there was hidden. It's like you had to have some sort of knowledge to notice it really, and you know, which, I did, fortunately.

REDIET: Yeah, no, I definitely agree, but I wonder if everyone picked up an instrument, if people would listen the same way again.

I mean, how do we create that space, to make this music louder than it is today?

[Music]

REDIET: We hope you've enjoyed this journey of the history of jazz on Jackson Street. A fascinating chapter in Seattle's cultural tapestry.

Remember, the beat goes on, and the spirit of jazz will continue to inspire generations to come.