Kansas City Convention Report
By Shelley Wruk Finke
(with additional material by Sally Fee)

Our membership knows the key stops in jazz history: New Orleans, New York, Chicago, Kansas City. And many of us make a point of visiting at least one or two of them during our active lives, soaking up residual vibes by tracing the sites of musician haunts, jazz clubs, birthplaces, grave sites and other places that make us feel connected to the greats.

But unless one lives somewhat nearby, a visit to Kansas City likely ranks last on that short list. The jazz style that developed there was an important and specific one, though the musicians who were born there, while world famous, didn’t tend to remain. What’s important to know is that the jazz that belongs to Kansas City is still there, not only in museums and libraries, but on the bandstand. And we in the IAJRC were privileged to have both that very music and the history right before our eyes.

This year’s gathering was one of those rare, near-flawless meetings that proves what can be done with marked attention to planning and serves as a shining model for future conventions. In the Marriott Country Club Plaza hotel, Kansas City, members were greeted by higher-end hotel accommodations, attentive and eager staff, with a restaurant and café to cover all the gastronomic needs of the day, a safe and walkable area just outside the hotel and nearby neighborhoods well populated with pubs, pizza, burger and rib joints as well as finer dining options.

But beyond the strolling, eating, and lounging lay the real reasons for a memorable and valuable convention of jazz record collectors and enthusiasts: dozens of experienced collectors, educated experts and talented musicians gathering for the sole purpose of strutting their stuff for an appreciative membership.

Here’s a closer look at the programming for the Kansas City convention of 2013:

Nearly every year we convene we’re honored with an opening night extravaganza of the very best in rare jazz film clips and Soundies, carefully chosen and presented by our resident expert Mark Cantor. Mark brings a consistent high quality and variety of jazz film and video to the IAJRC conventions, acknowledging the differing jazz interests of the IAJRC membership while making sure the selections always swing. (To read about this year’s programming, see the listing at the end of this article.)

Among the other high-level offerings at every IAJRC convention: a three-day series of the most intelligent and well-researched panels and presentations in jazz, led by members and occasional guests who have lived and breathed their subjects and continue to believe in and build on their experiences.

Members presenting included Sonny McGown, who profiled premier rhythm guitarist Steve Jordan; Trevor Tolley with a recorded and pictorial overview of boogie woogie; Don Manning sharing his personal recorded interviews with Charlie Parker’s mother after his death, and educating us on the lesser-known alto player Buster Smith (mentor to Bird); and Jan Evensmo, substituting for the absent Loren Schoenberg, sharing a number of previously unheard — and surprisingly listenable -- recordings from the William Savory Collection at the National Jazz Museum of Harlem.

Dick Raichelson continued his tradition of moderating the Discographical Forum, during which members present or pose short researched topics. He requested Kansas City material such as the Merritt label, Mystic City sheet music, KKK record information, and jazz orchestras on New Flexo. Sonny McGown played an aircheck recording his father had cut on his own equipment, and Geoff Wheeler asked for information regarding a 1978 jazz festival held on the White House Lawn which he is researching.

A producers panel featured Geoff Wheeler, Bob Porter and Dick Raichelson taking questions and sharing stories from their experience as record producers. Porter recalled the late, crafty Boris Rose and the vast archive of bootlegs and dubs that still linger in a Bronx basement.

Of particular note for their popularity and connection to Kansas City were three programs by local individuals. The first, a live piano performance, featured the incredible talent of pianist Bram Wijnands. Originally from Holland, Wijnands took on New York at the age of 25 but soon found it wasn’t a good fit. Friends from Kansas City living in New York urged him to try his hand there and there he’s stayed.

Wijnands entertained not only with his expertise at the keyboard playing selections in stride, boogie and blues, but sprinkled them with stories of Art Tatum, Errol Garner, Fats Waller, Count Basie, and Teddy Wilson. Attendees were treated to “Jumpin’ at the Woodside”, “Honeysuckle Rose” and “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head”, an acknowledgement of the versatility of the piano as a multi-functional instrument. He closed his performance with a stride/harmonic version of Vincent Youmans’ “Carioca”.

Chuck Haddix, sound recording specialist and enthusiastic director of the Marr Sound Archives at the University of Missouri at Kansas City, completed the afternoon sessions with “Early Bird: The Life, Career and Recordings of Charlie Parker in Kansas City”. Haddix authored the recently published Bird: The Life and Music of Charlie Parker and shared stories and early recordings, including sets, set lists and personnel heard during the genesis of bebop. While giving proper attention to Parker’s recordings and musical legacy, the book also takes a frank look at Parker’s conflicted personal life, addictions and mental health.

Dewayne Gilley presented a “Tribute to Myra Taylor”, Kansas City jazz pioneer. Beginning her career at age 15 as a
dancer, and progressing to vocalist, she appeared and recorded with Fletcher Henderson and Eubie Blake and entertained troops at military bases. Gilley’s personal stories, photos, and recordings chronicled Myra Taylor’s life until she returned to Kansas City at the age of 94.

The final and perhaps most shining example of quality programming came this year in the form of an impressive Friday afternoon field trip to a number of historically significant and academically intriguing Kansas City jazz locales, truly capturing the interest of our exclusive membership. Often an outside excursion can feel forced, especially if there is not a direct connection to jazz history or recording in that city. In those cases, it’s probably best not to fake it and to just “play indoors”. But in Kansas City there is no such dilemma. Admittedly the planned excursion was an ambitious one, with four significant stops planned within a five-hour period, but there is no question that it had to be attempted.

The first stop took us to the nearby Marr Sound Archives of the University of Missouri at Kansas City. Director Chuck Had-dix led IAJRC members through this researcher’s gem tucked into the university library displaying radios, phonographs, music boxes, and juke boxes from all eras — nearly all of them functional. Visitors watched up close the robotic fetching of the automated library stacks and were able to spend a few minutes behind the shoulder of one of the archive engineers as he worked on a digital clean-up. Not only does this repository hold thousands of books, recordings, musical memorabilia and ephemera, but the collection is completely accessible (but only with permission; the stacks are strictly “don’t touch” to tour groups).

The second stop took our eager group to the famed hub of Kansas City jazz, the 18th & Vine District, and the American Jazz Museum, a jazz wonderland noted for its interactive exhibits. As described on the Museum’s web page: “Acclaimed as an ‘interactive paradise’ by the NY Times, these exhibits bring to life the great American art form of jazz. Listening stations, touch screen interactives, and custom mixing boards complement displays of artifacts, graphics, and commissioned artwork in a sculpturally dynamic space that makes this sophisticated musical style accessible and engaging for visitors of different ages and musical backgrounds.

“Throughout the exhibits, collections of photos, sheet music, and posters from the heyday of jazz create context for historic artifacts such as Charlie Parker’s Grafton saxophone, one of Louis Armstrong’s trumpets, and a sequined gown worn by Ella Fitzgerald.”

Our group was treated to a personal tour of this exquisitely designed celebration of jazz in the worlds of art, music, history and technology, calling to the academician/historian/recording geek in each of us. The adjoining Blue Room, an authentic nightclub with weekly live jazz, is inviting, with clear-topped tables loaded with jazz-related items to peruse as patrons sip drinks and listen. Those who weren’t present can take a look at the museum’s complete and satisfying website www.americanjazzmuseum.org.

Next up a few doors away: the Mutual Musicians Foundation, the African American musicians union local established in 1917. The building is a National Historic Landmark and continues the tradition (since 1930) of hosting jam sessions on weekends and serving as a social club and rehearsal space for members. The Foundation was featured prominently in the 1979 film “The Last of the Blue Devils”.

Regrettably, our groups’ collective stamina had petered out by the time of the fourth destination of the day -- an open house at Vinyl Renaissance Records -- and the event was rescheduled for later in the weekend. Kudos to the convention committee for zeroing in on exactly the right destinations for IAJRC members to enjoy, appreciate and remember.

Regarding the regular convention features back at the Marriott -- the listening room and the vendor sales room -- there is a strong consistency of operation in these smaller spaces that the members depend on. As a tradition, the listening room remains open until the wee hours and attracts a free flow of visitors who listen, comment and contribute to the fare by sharing their 78 rpm records (though other types of media are purportedly welcome). Freewheeling as it sounds, there is one unspoken requirement: no talking is allowed while a record is being played. Enforcing that ideal in a mixed group of traditionalists and modernists is as challenging as recruiting a dozen 20 year-olds into the IAJRC before Christmas.

The vendor sales room is always a comfortable place for good-natured visiting and meeting up – no different from other years -- though this time around we missed a few of our regular vendors because of scheduling conflicts. Their absence was somewhat obscured by a colorful local additions (such as funky Zebedee’s and their curious array of 45s playing on a tote-able pink plastic phonograph). Stepping into a room with two or three portables playing against each other in various corners can easily lead to a few lost hours among the vast supply of records, books, videos and DVDs, posters, prints, sheet

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music and unexpected ephemera. (Not that there’s anything wrong with that.)

Board meetings and membership meetings are necessary and stimulating, but can be unpleasant, not just because they interrupt one’s breakfast, but because they tend to lead to the same theme of frustration faced by virtually all preservation-oriented jazz organizations: how to grow, or simply, to survive.

How do we keep it all going and growing, with a dozen or so members passing on each year (and not necessarily being replaced)? Why don’t more members attend conventions or show an interest in serving on our board of directors? How do we corral those elusive dozen twenty-somethings who can actually afford to join and then gather for a three-day convention each year? While we await a conclusive answer, we’re blessed with a few particularly active and enthusiastic members—among them Sally Fee, Ian Tiele, Lee Goode, Perry Huntoon and Geoff Wheeler—who help us move on to the next year and, hopefully, new insights. A look at the minutes of the General Membership Meeting (printed in this issue) will give non-convention-goers an idea of the various concerns within our membership.

After three days of convening and ignoring repeated urges for an afternoon nap, we came to the final event of the weekend—the awards banquet followed by a live jazz performance. Current president Geoff Wheeler introduced those past presidents of the IAJRC who were present, and each was honored with genuinely grateful applause: Duncan Schiedt, Dick Raichelson, Gene Miller and Ron Pikielek.

Best Article awards, presented by committee chair Tristan Argenti, went to:

1st - Albert Haim for “The Charleston in the 1920’s” (Vol. 45 No. 2)
2nd - Mark Cantor for “Celluloid Improvisations: Louis Jordan and ‘Caldonia’” (Vol. 45, No. 4)
3rd - Geoff Wheeler for his piece on the Signature Label Series (Vol. 45, No. 3)

Gene Miller presented two Meritorious Service Awards this year, to Mark Cantor and Sonny McGown. Both Mark and Sonny are masters of presentation, with ready stores of knowledge and an ease of narration.

The 2013 recipient of the President’s Award is Andrew Smith, who was cited for his decades-long dedication to providing the IAJRC video library with comprehensive footage of the annual conventions.

A successful new feature of the banquet is the selection of a variety of donated raffle prizes. Its popularity is growing not only for the attendees but the contributors, adding an element of anticipation and fun to the awards banquet. A sampling of the 2013 prizes: a Mosaic Records Earl Hines box set with 7 CDs, online subscriptions from Tom Lord’s Jazz Discography, subscriptions to Downbeat, CDs from a number of labels including Arbors and Delmark Records and a variety of gift certificates and books.

The culmination of the banquet is traditionally a live music performance from a local band, which may not sound like much of a challenge, but it can be. A music performance in a hotel dining room, usually cursed with poor lighting, bad acoustics and insufficient staging, has great potential for a musical train wreck. And the band itself must offer something worthy of our membership’s experienced and critical ears.

No such concerns this time around. Our esteemed group was totally blessed with a jazz ensemble seemingly made-to-order in the form of the Vine Street Rumble. This 14-piece big band devotes itself accurately representing, through both the original arrangements and their own transcriptions, the swing orchestras and smaller bands that originated in Kansas City: Bennie Moten, Count Basie, Jay McShann, Andy Kirk and the 12 Clouds of Joy, Harlan Leonard and His Rockets, Mary Lou Williams and Joe Turner among others. Their energy and dedication to authenticity completely exceeded expectations. At least a few among us wished for some skilled lindyhoppers to materialize and complete the picture (and if there were any technical shortcomings in the room, they went unnoticed). After a truly fine convention, the Vine Street Rumble supplied the musical exclamation point we always hope for but just can’t always get.

A most approving and thankful shout-out goes to the convention committee headed by Ian Tiele, with the seemingly tireless assistance of Lee Goode and Perry Huntoon, as well as to non-member assistant Marc Kritzer. Their many-handed efforts continue to impress, year after year, evidence of the importance of having a committee devoted to convention planning.

The Kansas City convention rocked on every level. Ian and his team are establishing a model that works, resulting in an IAJRC that has stepped up its game. If this year’s experience taught us anything, it’s that sometimes there is just too much to see and not enough days in which to do it comfortably. Yes, Kansas City was that good.

(all the above photographs by Marc Kritzer)

Marc Cantor’s Classic Jazz Film Presentation
09 minutes - general introduction + introduction to set #1
37 minutes - set #1

(1) Old Man Jazz (2001) - Ernie Andrews, vocal accompanied by the Six Hooper All Stars
(2) Red Bank Boogie (1943) - Count Basie and his Orchestra
(3) Going To Chicago (1958) - Jimmy Rushing, vocal, accompanied by the Billy Taylor All Stars
(4) First Class Gardener (1974-79) - Big Joe Turner, vocal, accompanied by Jay McShann
(5) I Ain’t Got Nobody (1933) - Max and Dave Fleischer “Screen Song” - The Mills Brothers
(6) Dance of the Gremlins + Swinging the Blues - Count Basie and his Orchestra
(7) ‘Gator Serenade (1948) - Andy Kirk and his Orchestra
(8) Away We Go (1967) - Buddy Rich and his Orchestra

08 minutes - introduction to set #2
31 minutes - set #2
(1) Dispossessed Blues (1943) - Lynn Albritton + The Four Knobs
(2) What’s Your Story, Morning Glory? (1978) - Mary Lou Williams
(3) Darn That Dream (1959) - Ahmad Jamal Trio
(4) Lonesome Lover Blues (1946) - Billy Eckstine and his Orchestra
(6) China Boys (1956) - The Five Pennies
(7) unidentified title (1937) - Original Hot Club of France
(8) Lady Be Good + Memories of You (1955) - Clifford Brown

06 minutes - introduction to set #3
31 minutes - set #3
(1) Looney (1937) - Al Cooper and the Savoy Sultans
(2) Swinging In Harlem (1937) - Erskine Hawkins and his Orchestra
(3) Suzi Cute television commercial (ca. mid 1960s) - Louis Armstrong
(4) Lullaby of Broadway (1958) - Stuff Smith
(5) Moonlight in Vermont (1958) - Buddy Collette Quintet
(6) Chelsea Bridge (1959) - Ben Webster
(7) I Wish I Were Twins (1937) - Coleman Hawkins
(8) John’s Abbey (1959) - Bud Powell Trio
(9) Green Dolphin Street (1977) - Benny Carter Quartet

set #4
(1) Back To the Apple (1962) - Count Basie and his Orchestra
(2) Home movie footage (ca. 1941) - Count Basie and his Orchestra
(3) Things Ain’t What They Used to Be (1943) - Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson, Cootie Williams and his Orchestra
(4) Lemon Drop (1952) - Hot Lips Page
(5) Hot House (1952) - Charlie Parker/Dizzy Gillespie Quintet
(6) After You’ve Gone (1945-56) - Art Hodes and his Band
(7) Jumpin’ With Symphony Sid (1958) - Art Ford All Stars

set #5
(1) Satin Doll (1964) - Nancy Wilson
(2) Honeysuckle Rose (1956) - Anita O’Day, Pete Jolly Trio
(3) At Long Last Love (1969) - Carmen McRae
(4) Time Marches On (1949) - Eddie Condon and his Band
(5) How High the Moon (1949) - Ella Fitzgerald, Billy Taylor Trio
(6) Home movie footage - Jump For Joy (1941) - Duke Ellington and his Orchestra
(7) Leave Us Leap (1947) - Gene Krupa and his Orchestra
(8) The Duke (1954) - Dave Brubeck Quartet
(9) It’s All Right With Me (ca. 1958) - Erroll Garner Trio
(10) Martian Bossa Nova (1962) - Shorty Rogers and his Giants

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