

Building a Thriving Jazz Community: The Georgia Straight Jazz Society Knows How to Get It Done

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The Georgia Straight Big Band is just one of the groups developed by the Georgia Straight Jazz Society. *The Comox Valley's Georgia Straight Jazz Society (GSJS) could teach a lot to jazz societies across the country.*

While many such organizations fall into the trap of promoting touring acts over local players, the 150 member GSJS has found a way to encourage both and is quickly becoming one of the most dynamic and successful promoters of jazz in our region.

Founded in 2006 by a small group of volunteers, the non-profit GSJS runs a weekly jazz club in Courtenay that regularly sees up to 90 people filling the Elks Hall to hear local groups. It also offers a highly successful annual concert series featuring touring players, and has developed educational initiatives such as a bursary fund and youth “big band challenge” that encourage the development of young talent in the region.

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As well, GSJS has forged relationships with local businesses and with players from around the island (including Campbell River, Parksville-Qualicum, Nanaimo, and Port Alberni), and it has launched a community big band which now functions as a separate entity under the direction of Greg Bush from Vancouver Island University.

The Society also maintains a superb website developed by board member Rick Husband that keeps everyone well informed of the group’s activities, archives local events, and acts as a valuable jazz resource.

Taken together these activities suggest a highly successful community jazz organization that others could learn from.

So what's the secret?

Board member Rob Peterson cites dedicated volunteers, a financial formula "that works," and a consistent community-based approach as factors in their success. He notes that GSJS hasn't gotten lost in trying to bring in big-name expensive acts and intentionally hasn't gone the jazz festival route which he says is "financially risky."

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For Dale Graham, another board member and this year's coordinator of the Society's Thursday Night Jazz Club, it's "all about maintaining relationships with local players." The Society keeps a roster of local acts and also runs a one-hour jam session for players who want to sit in following the main show.

Peterson adds that "all comers are welcome" and people know "that if they bring their horn in" they'll be able to play. "If you're a drummer (in the feature act), you're off your kit" if another player wants to sit in at the end of the show.

He also notes the quality of the room itself ("a special place to play") as an important factor. "When there's 90 people just listening and paying attention to the music, it's pretty incredible."

The focus on local talent has brought a "big change in the level of people's musicality" according to Graham, a vocalist herself (Peterson is a drummer and most of the board members are or have been players at one time or another).

Graham says she has seen a significant progression in musicianship not just among youth but also "us old adults" because the society and their club provide a developmental focus.

Their ticketed Sunday concerts bring in professional players from the Island, Vancouver and beyond and have included the likes of Brandi Disterheft ("arguably one of the finest shows we've ever had"), Phil Dwyer, Jodi Proznick with PJ Perry, and the Marc Atkinson Trio. This

Sunday (Oct. 25), guitarist [Bill Coon](#) performs with bassist Darren Radtke and Bernie Arai on drums.

Peterson says that with a small group of dedicated volunteers “it can be done” and GSJS would be happy to provide a template for others wanting to start their own community-based jazz organizations.

To learn more about GSJS visit their [website](#).

– Rick Gibbs