

Where's all that jazz?

With the renewed interest in the genre among music aficionados, jazz will always have a future in Delhi.



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The band, 'Be Why' from France, performing live on the stage at the jazz in the Park Festival at Nehru Park. Outdoor venues have brought in a new segment of people to the concerts.

Jazz lovers in the Capital recently celebrated International Jazz Day with great gusto. Even before it officially opens its doors later this month, the second outlet of The Piano Man Jazz Club held a performance to celebrate International Jazz Day on April 30.

The venue was packed. Among the appreciative audience that listened to the mellifluous strains of the band Paddy and Friends was Eric Falt, UNESCO Director and Representative for Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.

"In 2011, UNESCO officially declared April 30 to be International Jazz Day, as jazz has always had a long cultural heritage across the world," said Falt.

Jazz may not be as popular as other forms of music in Delhi yet, but in certain spaces, as the first notes are played, one can sense an intensity of appreciation which can never be found at a rock concert, or the greatest Bollywood extravaganza.

In Delhi, jazz has, for the past few decades, had a relatively small but faithful following. Larger numbers of young audiences have favoured rock, pop, Bollywood and fusion music.

Inevitably, therefore, there are fewer venues for jazz in the Capital. Apart from The Piano Man Jazz Club, Home is a members only jazz club in PVR, Vasant Kunj.

Lock and Key in Gurgaon hosts duo performance at times. Although it has jazz acts sometimes, Saints and Sinners mostly focuses on rock and pop. Depot, in Greater Kailash, once a favourite of jazz aficionados, is now sealed.

QUALITY NOT QUANTITY

Despite the handful of places where jazz is played in Delhi, Arjun Sagar Gupta, founder of the Piano Man doesn't despair: "I agree places which regularly host jazz in the city are few," he says, "But jazz has a growing and dedicated following, as well as many dedicated and talented musicians. Things can only go up from here."

Jazz has come a long way from its origins as improvised protest music composed by African-Americans in New Orleans. In India, its roots are stronger - and longer - culturally, in cities such as Kolkata, Mumbai and Goa, jazz has always held a more prominent space.

The entire basis of its appeal is that players have the freedom and ability to experiment and improvise. This means it won't always have many mainstream lovers who can relate to it. Over the past decade, however, there has been a growing interest in this genre in the Capital.

As Sanjeev Bhargava, founder of Seher, an initiative which promotes the arts, explains, "All major cities in the world, including India have hosted jazz festivals outdoors. So we thought Delhi should also have one.

In 2011, the first, 'Jazz in the Park' festival was held in Nehru Park. Initially, many advised against this, since jazz was perceived to have appeal for an older generation and not something that the youth were wildly enthusiastic about," says Bhargava.

"But the huge turnout proved many of the doubters wrong. Jazz had mostly been heard in concert halls and auditoriums. Bringing it out of these confines had given it a broader platform, and generated more awareness and interest," he adds.

With the renewed interest in the genre among music aficionados, jazz will always have a future in Delhi **INSIDE STORY THE GROWTH OF THE GENRE** Since 2013, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, (ICCR), is now in-charge of hosting the International Jazz Festival at Nehru Park.

ICCR programme director Mahinder Sehgal says there is a certain craze for jazz music in Delhi. "We witnessed this on the second day of the last festival in March 2019. Despite three hours of rain, a large number of jazz lovers didn't move out."

Alliance Francaise is one of the bestknown jazz venues in Delhi. Mitushi Khurana Kapoor, head of Culture and Communications, declares the interest in jazz has grown over the past decade, "I've been organising jazz concerts for the past eight years in Delhi. In these years, I've seen a huge increase of interest as well as in the number of people who attend. If eight years ago, there were 50 people in the audience, now we have a housefull."

Megha Balani, head of strategy and operations at the Delhi-based Global Music Institute, feels there is still a lot of room for the jazz scene to grow in the Capital. "Schools such as ours are really pushing music education, but we need many more spaces where jazz can be heard."

Says Priyana Chauhan of the duo Eshaan & Priyana, "The jazz scene in Delhi is at a nascent stage at present. Jazz as a style demands a high level of involvement from both musicians and the audience. If music schools push music appreciation and interest, venues such as the Piano Man, Home, and Speakeasy are pushing the listeners."

Jazz enthusiast Aishani Singh, pursuing a Bachelors in Education from Delhi University, feels the small space for jazz in Delhi as opposed to other cities is because of cultural differences.

"Places such as Kolkata, Mumbai and Goa have always had a vibrant jazz scene, as they did not only have a rich cultural history, but have been cosmopolitan cities longer than Delhi has. It is only in recent years that interest in jazz in the city has picked up, with venues such as The Piano Man, Sidecar, and Home introducing authentic jazz to Delhiites."

ON THE BRIGHTER SIDE

But the paucity of playing spaces and venues hasn't dampened the fervour for the genre. Shreya Ray, a writer and jazz vocalist, feels encouraged by the growing interest in jazz in Delhi. "There's a lot of exciting stuff and great interesting acts, original song-writing and numerous international artists visiting the city.

All this makes the scene very alive and vibrant." She adds, "Places like Home in Vasant Kunj and the Mumbai-based music management company Gatecrash, which also co-curates Home's programming, are establishments promoting jazz that stand out.

This is because of the relationships they have with artists, their respect and understanding of art, good curation and the audience." Clearly, says Ray, who has been part of the Shreya Ray Quartet, Shreya & Shonai and The Subcontinental Jazz Project, jazz's reach can interest a wide range of listeners.

"Last month, we were invited to perform at a corporate event. While all the big sahebs were mostly networking, our biggest fan seemed to be a lone listener, who stood against a wall, transfixed, listening to music born in 1930s America, being played by an Indian vocalist and French guitarist.

Of course, we were singing of love, heartbreak, despair and longing... and something clearly had resonated with her." Others, such as the jazz drummer Reuben Narain, who formerly ran the jazz group Drift, are equally optimistic about the future of jazz in the city.

"I actually think that the jazz scene here is at par with anything they have in Kolkata and Mumbai, if not better. Jazz is niche pretty much everywhere. It was niche when it began in New Orleans in the 1920s. Improvisation is an acquired taste, and that is exactly what I like about it. Many think jazz is preferred by an older age group, but that could be because many of the great jazz exponents became really popular in the 1950s and 1960s, and even prior to that. However, when I play it in front of an audience, or when, in fact anyone listens to the music played, I do not at all feel that jazz is age-centric."

Narain goes on to say that jazz musicians in the city are fortunate to have several venues to frequent. "There are Sidecar and The Finch in Greater Kailash and Speakeasy in Sector 15, Gurgaon."

With the renewed interest in the genre among music aficionados, jazz will always have a future in Delhi. It could even be the beginnings of a new jazz age.