

The Origins of Boston's Jazz Workshop

Hard Work on Huntington Avenue Led to Boylston Street Success

Al Natale and Richard Vacca

The April 13-26, 2004 issue of Boston's free entertainment magazine *Stuff@Night* published a story titled "Lost Legends." It recalled the history of two well-known Boston clubs, the Jazz Workshop and Paul's Mall. But the Jazz Workshop's history starts ten years before the doors first opened on Boylston Street. The whole story is even better than the one published in *Stuff@Night*.

The origins of the Jazz Workshop go back to the early 1950s and a quartet of local jazz legends. Charlie Mariano suggested to Varty Haroutunian (Hart), Herb Pomeroy, and Ray Santisi that they start a school, a workshop, to offer classes and private lessons, and host jam sessions—in other words, create a place where students could play with professional musicians. They rented some space on Stuart Street near Copley Square, moved in a few upright pianos, and started in 1953. This was the first Jazz Workshop.

The manager of a basement bar around the corner on Huntington Avenue, across the street from Storyville, approached Haroutunian and Santisi with a proposal to start regular gigs in his club. They started in the spring of 1954, and that was the beginning of the jazz policy at the Stable. It started with a trio—Haroutunian playing tenor, Santisi piano, and Peter Littman the drums. Then other musicians started coming around. The trio became a quartet with the addition of bassist John Neves. And eventually Herb Pomeroy got off the road and joined the band. This was all separate from the Jazz Workshop itself, and gradually teaching activity there tailed off, but the musicians kept "Jazz Workshop" as the unofficial club name.

Under Haroutunian's leadership, the small group grew to a sextet and eventually was playing four nights a week. In late 1955, Pomeroy's big band started working one night, and then two nights a week. Finally, trombonist Gene DiStasio led a quintet on Monday nights to fill out the week. Business was good.

The Stable was an exciting place in those days. It was a small room invariably packed with enthusiastic listeners. Outstanding Boston musicians were regulars there, including Joe Gordon, Serge Chaloff, Lennie Johnson, Dave Chapman, and Alan Dawson. Jaki Byard worked as intermission pianist and big band saxophonist for a time. Everybody wanted to sit in, and even singers like Barbra Streisand took a turn on the bandstand.

For a time, Stable owner Harold Buchalter ran the club. Later he turned the place over to Haroutunian, Santisi, and Pomeroy, with Haroutunian as the manager. But good things end, and club was torn down in 1962 to build the Mass Pike Extension. Buchalter told the Stable crew that he intended to open another room on Boylston Street, and he wanted Haroutunian to manage it. That club, named the Jazz Workshop, opened in 1963 in the basement of Buchalter's Inner Circle Restaurant. On opening night, Stan Getz was the headliner, Pomeroy and Santisi were in the band, and Haroutunian was running the show. Varty remained there until 1965, when Fred Taylor, Tony Mauriello, and Peter Lane assumed club ownership and eased him out. There was some legal wrangling over who owned the Jazz Workshop name, and Taylor and his partners prevailed over Haroutunian in court.

Haroutunian went on to manage another club in the Hotel Bradford, and Pomeroy and Santisi continued on as performers and educators. Taylor and Mauriello, meanwhile, were successful in building the Jazz Workshop and Paul's Mall, clubs that played a major role on the Boston jazz scene for 15 years. But those early years on Huntington Avenue were equally important, and a whole lot of fun besides.

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Varty Haroutunian blowing tenor at the Stable in 1959. Photo courtesy of Elsa Haroutunian.

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