

VALLEY Advocate

Music

A Bag of Jazz

Valley jazz impresario Glenn Siegel offers a fruitful new kind of share.

By James Heflin

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What if, instead of bringing home perfumey tomatoes, boatloads of kale and pounds of purpled turnip, you could pay for an annual share that would bring to your ears the mellow tones of stand-up bass, piano improv or horn solos?

That novel idea is the guiding principle behind Jazz Shares, the latest project undertaken by Glenn Siegel, jazz impresario and head of UMass radio station WMUA. He already heads up prominent jazz concert series Magic Triangle, Solos and Duos, and World of Piano, but Siegel wants to bring even more sounds to town, and his own longstanding farm share membership provided the inspiration.

"I've heard of other jazz societies and art shares through the grapevine, but I haven't come across anyone else who's doing quite what we're trying to do," Siegel says. "I've wanted to do more jazz presenting for a long time."

"[The farm share] seemed like a good model to be able to do this without any real institutional support, as a bunch of likeminded individuals," Siegel says. "As society crumbles and the institutions along with it, it's more incumbent upon us to grow our own food, make our own art and cultural statements."

When people ask Siegel how jazz is faring, he has a ready answer. "The health of the music is fine; the opportunities to make a living in the music are abysmal," says Siegel. "Now that virtually every major university in the nation has a jazz department, the level of musicianship is through the roof. If you're a composer, you can get people to sight-read the most complicated music you can write. Jazz is changing, it's incorporating world music. It's moving in many directions—it's not the linear projection of jazz from its first 80 years. Now it's everything at once—Gypsy jazz, more rock players like Medeski, Martin and Wood, people coming from Indian music. It's kind of an exciting time to be a listener/consumer because the level of creativity is so high. But I think clubs struggle—the economics are tough for musicians. Unless you have a day gig, a teaching gig or a spouse with a good income, the number of musicians who can make a middle-class living is very small."

Siegel explains that he's contacted by musicians who want to participate in his series, but they sometimes end up saying no because there isn't enough money available to make the trip worthwhile. Because of that, Siegel's approach is, often, to find musicians who are coming near the Valley, and invite them to tack on another gig en route.

"It's kind of what I would call opportunistic—we don't have a ton of money, so our artist fees aren't as generous as I can be at UMass, although they're fairly modest there too. . . We will probably piggyback a lot on Firehouse 12 in New Haven—a cool little club not far from Yale. It's close enough that we can probably entice some people to come up the day before or after."

It's that exact idea that provided the first booking in the Jazz Shares series, a December appearance by the Taylor Ho Bynum Sextet. Others are yet to be determined, but Siegel plans on 10 shows per year. "I'm doing the programming with input from other shareholders," says Siegel. "We're dividing up the work. There's a steering committee of 10 folks who are helping out. Some musicians, some academics, people from all walks of life."

"I've been doing concerts long enough that I have a pretty good core audience of people who come to my shows regularly," Siegel says. "We started [looking for shareholders] there, through my personal email list, and friends, and friends of friends. We're looking to have 100 shareholders. We're halfway there—we're approaching businesses about being sponsors, talking to venues, doing it all at once. We're going to be working at the Arts Block Café in Greenfield; in Holyoke, a Congregationalist church with a sanctuary that seats about 200. In Northampton, Smith College—perhaps—and at the Universalist-Unitarian House in Northampton. We hope to work with the Community Music School in Springfield."

Siegel isn't too concerned about overwhelming local music consumers. "People ask me, 'Don't you think there's a lot of jazz, a lot of music in Valley? Aren't you worried about oversaturation?' The only way to build audience is through exposure. Being in the presence of really talented musicians with something to say—people really respond to it," he says. "The more shows we do, the more audience we'll bring along with us. The fact that the concerts are already paid for takes a little bit of the worry off paying the artist or satisfying the venue. Assuming we have all the



Photo Courtesy of Glenn Siegel

The Taylor Ho Bynum Sextet--the first band booked in Glenn Siegel's Jazz Shares series.

shareholders we need, we'll be able to take some risk. We can lead, not follow."

That proactive attitude is part of what distinguishes the Jazz Shares effort. Though at first blush the idea seems to be just a new name for a season pass, Jazz Shares members will get a chance to be far more than audience members. "Someone might donate their home for a reception after the concert, or there might be a situation where one of the shareholders loans us a drum kit. Different people will write program notes, emcee, pick the musicians up at the train station. I'm doing the lion's share of the work now, but my hope is that as we get rolling over the course of a season or two, more shareholders will step up and do the legwork necessary to make the concerts happen," says Siegel. "People have responded to the idea, the DIY, self-propelled nature of it."

Shareholders can expect a wide variety of styles in the series. "I'm trying to get a well-rounded picture of jazz in the 21st century," Siegel says. "It won't be all avant garde or all traditional. There will be a balance of styles and instruments."

Siegel also hopes, in the long term, to tap into the Valley's growing pool of jazz talent. It may seem surprising that jazz is on the upswing among Valley players, but the evidence is clear.

"There are players at all levels," Siegel says. "IHEG [Iron Horse Entertainment Group] has sort of given up on jazz for the most part—certainly compared to past years—but the jazz workshop at the [Northampton] Clarion has really taken off and galvanized a lot of folks. At those sessions there are young people playing alongside 70-year-olds. There's a lot of talent, a lot of gigs that don't pay much, a lot of DIY stuff. There are a lot of things happening on the campuses, too. [Amherst College saxophonist] Jason Robinson moving to town kind of energized things. The FAC [UMass Fine Arts Center] has a commitment to jazz, and the Vermont Jazz Center has added a lot to the offerings. I think there's a lot of interest in the music.

"Over time, we'll incorporate people who live around here."

Siegel puts a finer point on a sometimes-neglected fact: "Interest is on the upswing, but the Valley has a long history of the music here."

The first concert in the Jazz Shares series features pianist Angelica Sanchez and guitarist Omar Tamez and happens Sunday, Nov. 4 at 7:30 p.m. at the United Congregational Church, 300 Appleton St., Holyoke.

For info on purchasing a jazz share, visit jazzshares.org.