

Jazz society finds a home in Waterloo

Not-for-profit club has found a 'dynamite space' at Huether Hotel

By Terry Pender, Record staff

WATERLOO REGION — Stephen Preece is talking jazz.

"It's a dynamite space," Preece says of the Jazz Room.

The Jazz Room is the venue for the recently formed Grand River Jazz Society. It is located in the historic Huether Hotel at King and Princess streets in Waterloo.

The stage is under construction. The society is buying a Yamaha grand piano for the club. From this September to next June the society plans to stage 80 shows.

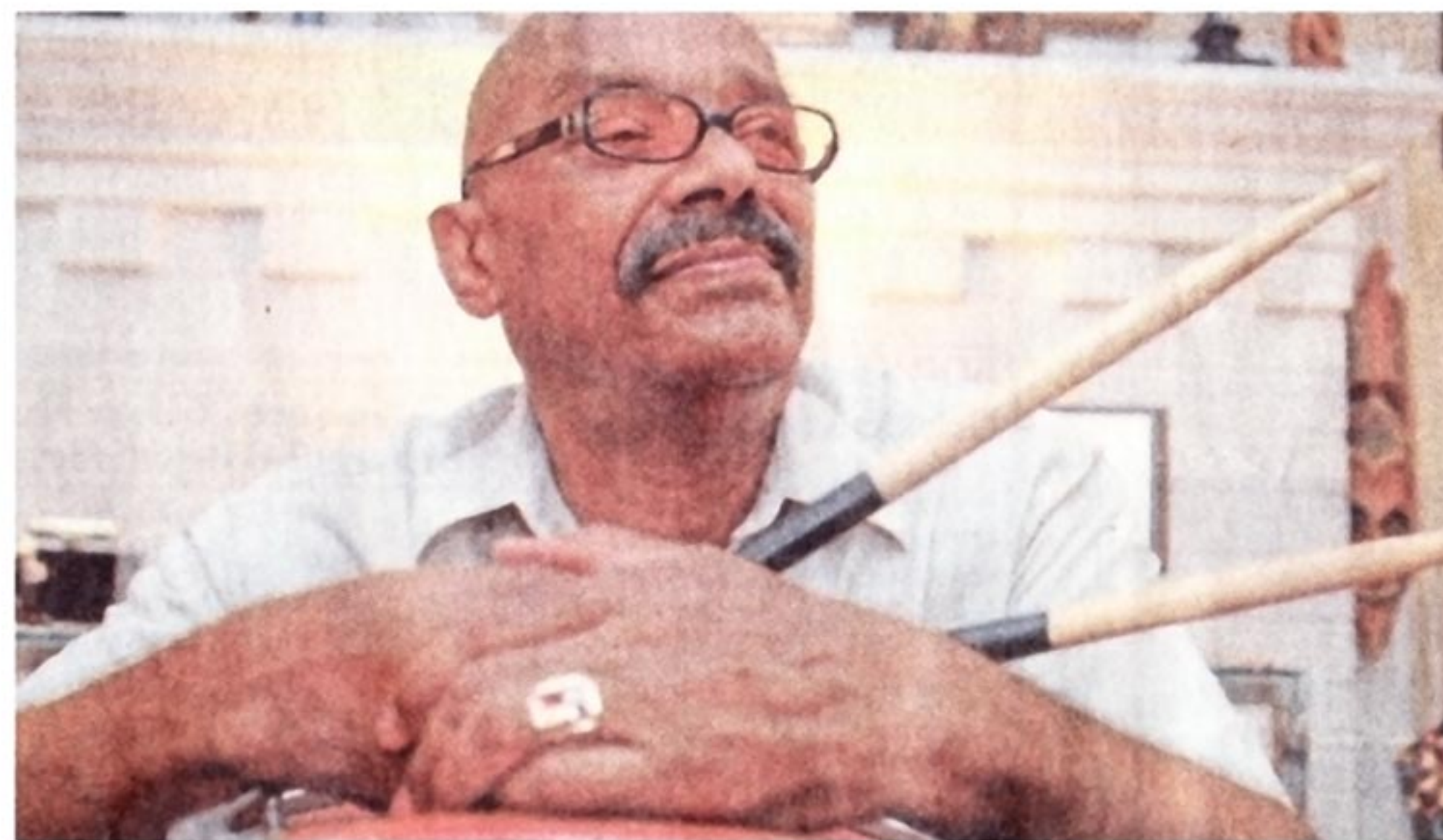
"It's an ambitious program, that is a lot of music," says Preece, the executive director of the Grand River Jazz Society.

Saturday night shows will feature out-of-town artists. Friday nights will feature local acts.

"I think this is the sweet spot right here," Preece says, standing where a couple of custom-built tables will be located in front of the stage.

The Grand River Jazz Society is a not-for-profit group so it can apply for grants.

"I just talked to the Ontario Arts Council. They see the poten-



COLIN MCCONNELL, RECORD NEWS SERVICES



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Archie Alleyne and Kollage (left) and the David Occhipinti Quartet have already committed to playing at Waterloo's new Jazz Room.

tial for a network of jazz clubs in Ontario in different cities," Preece says.

"This is a musician-centred thing. That is why we are not-for-profit," Preece says. "We are going to treat the musicians well and pay them well."

The Huether Hotel will make money on the sale of alcohol and food.

The jazz society will rely on memberships, which will cost about \$300, and cover charges at the door. If you buy a membership you don't pay the covers. Local bands will be paid a base plus 75 per cent of the door.

"It is a total win-win," Preece says. "The room was not being

used much."

Preece, a Wilfrid Laurier University business professor who specializes in arts management, says the Grand River Jazz Society will soon launch a website and will be selling memberships at the Uptown Jazz Festival.

The jazz society wants to sell 160 memberships before the Jazz Room opens in September.

"That will get us close to covering our artists' fees for the Saturday night shows," Preece says.

The society is also looking for corporate sponsorships in addition to grants.

For more than 10 years, the base of jazz fans in Kitchener and Waterloo has increased steadily

thanks to Jazz at the Registry, the Uptown Jazz Festival and the Jazz in the Black Hole Bistro at the Perimeter Institute.

Ted Warren, a Guelph-based jazz drummer, is the artistic director of the Grand River Jazz Society. Warren signs the acts and several are already committed, including Rich Brown and Rinse the Algorithm, Archie Alleyne and Kollage, the Pat Collins Trio and the David Occhipinti Quartet.

"My job is the easiest part," Warren says. "There are lots of great people doing lots of great things."

But there is a shortage of venues that pay.

Warren says jazz societies have thrived in Edmonton and Saskatoon for decades.

With volunteers and memberships, those societies have accomplished what a commercial club struggling to pay the bills could never achieve.

"It's tough, especially if it is a completely commercial venture," Warren says.

"The jazz society model works better. I think it is something that has been needed for a long time."

The jazz societies in Saskatoon and Edmonton are good role models, and Warren has played in their clubs.

"The only reason they are doing it is they are into the music, it's very cool that way," Warren says.

Pam Josey is on the board of the Edmonton Jazz Society. Since 1957, the Edmonton society has owned and operated Yardbird Suite, a licensed venue for the thrice-weekly jazz shows.

The City of Edmonton sold the building to the jazz society for a dollar 55 years ago, making it one of the longest-running jazz clubs in North America.

"We have artists from all over the world who come to the Yardbird Suite," Josey says.

"There is no place like the Yardbird Suite, they tell us that all the time."

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Volunteers wait on tables, work the bar and staff the box office. Other volunteers pick up musicians at the airport and bring them into the city. It is a not-for-profit group. If you buy an annual membership you do not pay cover charges, which range from \$14 to \$30.

"We do apply for various grants that are out there," Josey says. "You would be surprised

how much money really is out there for the taking if you know where to look for it."

The Edmonton Jazz Society has about 500 members. Every Tuesday night is a jam session. Jazz acts from New York, Toronto, Vancouver and elsewhere appear every Friday and Saturday night. Sometimes there are shows on Thursdays or Sundays as well.

"For sure there are three shows a week and sometimes four shows a week," Josey says in a phone interview from Edmonton.

The Saskatoon Jazz Society started around 1979 and recently moved into its own venue called the Basement. The 600-member society has one employee, Richard Haubrich, a jazz guitarist, who manages the Basement. "We have stumbled upon a great mod-

el, at least a model that is working well in Saskatoon," Haubrich says. "And people come to our shows, that's the bottom line."

Saskatoon, with a population of 225,000, supports live jazz shows in the Basement every Friday and Saturday night. Covers range from \$8 to \$40 for the Saturday night shows. The space is often rented out on other nights for private parties, CD releases or

corporate events. The society owns and runs the Basement so it gets the bar and kitchen profits.

The society renovated the space for the Basement in an old post office. The board of directors, through fundraising and sponsorships, secured \$250,000 in work for \$80,000. The landlord gave the jazz society six months of free rent.

"It was a whole community effort that got behind us," Haubrich says. "We got a hell of a deal here."

The board recently bought a \$90,000 Yamaha grand piano for the Basement, too. Most of the funds were donated.

"David Braid was one of the first guys to play our new Yamaha grand in January and he said it is the best piano in any jazz club in Canada," Haubrich says.

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Stephen Preece, executive director of the Grand River Jazz Society, stands in front of the Huether Hotel, which will now House the new Jazz Room, set to open in September