

Community opinions

A forum for readers in Dallas County

Jazz hits a blue note in Dallas

As an art form, it's on the wane in our city, says **Eric Van Steenburg of Lakewood**

You should try adding a little jazz to your life. After all, jazz is the only truly American musical invention.

Dozens of countries around the world have their own kind of music. Brazil has the samba. Jamaica has reggae. Mexico has mariachi. Canada has ... well, most countries have something. And the United States has jazz. It's ours. We created it a little more than 100 years ago in the Mississippi River delta through a combination of blues, spiritual work songs, gospel and immigrant tunes of the Caribbean.

And it's in danger of dying. Jazz great Miles Davis said when Louis Armstrong died in the 1970s that "jazz is dead." Well, it didn't die then, but it seems like it might be on life support now. Particularly in Dallas. Neil Slater, director of the world-renowned jazz studies program at the University of North Texas for decades, retired in 2008. His final concert was in November. Did you know that?

The Dallas Jazz Orchestra disappeared in the mid-1990s. The Oasis, a radio station in Dallas that played smooth jazz, today's most popular form of jazz, changed its format to something called "movin' music" a couple of years ago. So long, Kenny G.

That leaves jazz in Dallas — which is in a similar boat to other cities around the country — rather difficult to experience. Oh sure, you can find it every now and then in a local bar or eatery. But pure jazz has few homes here.

The University of North Texas continues to crank out some of the best jazz in the United States. And the famous One O'Clock Lab Band performs worldwide.

There's the Meadows Jazz Orchestra at SMU. It's trying to keep swing alive in our midst. After a surge in the late '90s, though, that style seems to be passé once again.

For consistent live performances, Sambuca is still around. But there's something not quite jazz-like about their new digs on McKinney Avenue in Uptown. I still miss the old, creaky-floored, cramped haunts in Deep Ellum. For that type of experience, you're just about limited to the Balcony Club in Lakewood.

Fortunately, KNTU is still on the air playing jazz standards. But the power of the UNT student station at 88.1 FM (KNTU) once voted

best radio station by *D Magazine* — isn't always strong enough to reach all over North Texas. Plus they throw enough sports, school board meetings, classical and Tejano music at you that it's hard to guarantee to find quality jazz every time you tune in.

So what can you do to support jazz? Here are four simple steps:

■ First, reconnect with live jazz. Find out when the One O'Clock Lab Band is playing in your area or the Meadows Jazz Orchestra is performing at SMU. Most of these student-performed concerts are free. If you have a few bucks, go to Sambuca for dinner and music every now and then, or hit the Balcony Club after April, when the no-smoking ban goes into effect.

■ Second, tune in to KNTU when you're in the car. Listen online. And make a donation to the station once a year. They'll even tell you about other live jazz performances for the next few days in their segments called "The Live Wire."

■ Third, buy some jazz. Three jazz albums that every American should own include *Kind of Blue* by Miles Davis, *Time Out* by Dave Brubeck, and *Getz/Gilberto* by Stan Getz and João Gilberto. Even a jazz neophyte will recognize a few tunes on each of these jazz classics.

■ Fourth, become jazz knowledgeable. The easiest way to do this is to buy, borrow or steal the outstanding Ken Burns documentary simply titled *Jazz*. Skip the first disc, which provides the background on how jazz was created, and start with the Disc 2. Watch it with your family. You won't be disappointed.

Now if we could just figure out a way to get smooth jazz back on Dallas radio.



Voices

Community



Eric Van Steenburg of Lakewood is the executive director of the Friends of the Katy Trail. He is also a

Community Voices volunteer columnist. His e-mail address is ericakatytrail@dallas.org. **GET OTHER** Voices columns from across North Texas and add your own comments. dallasnews.com/Voices