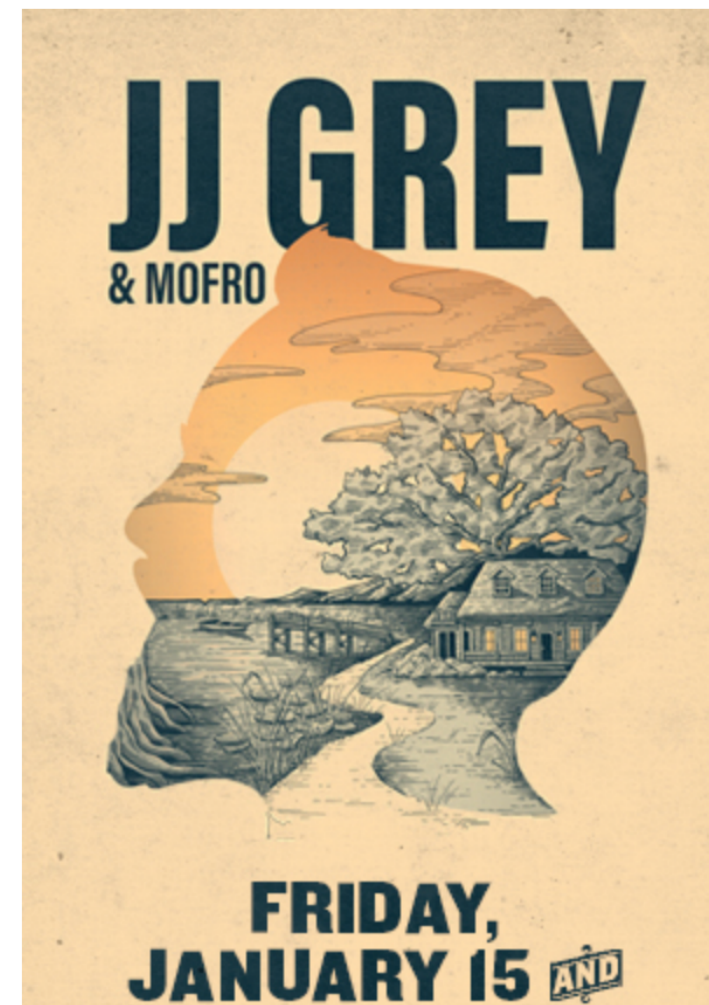




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The Heavy Lift

Jacksonville was once the jazz capital of the Southeast, but its rows of clubs have since been demolished in failed urban renewal attempts. As Downtown shows signs of growth, can the Jacksonville jazz scene follow?



Paul Jackson Live plays outside the Historic Stanton School for the cover of Folio.

JOHN ALOSZKA

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Crafted with notes of blues and brass, peppered with hints of rag and rhythm, and an irresistible swing of soul: you may know it as jazz. As the one of the only true genres endemic to the USA, jazz also holds over a century's worth of influence in Jacksonville. Historically, Downtown's LaVilla neighborhood was home to many popular jazz venues in the early to mid- 20th century among Black musicians. During its hey-day, the night-life hub had gained so much traction it was referred to as the Harlem of the South and even played host to a young Ray Charles. Though LaVilla doesn't sing the way it used to, its spirit has carried over into the '20s, where jazz is still roaring throughout the metro area. In present day, Jacksonville is home to John Lumpkin and Ulysses Owens Jr., the latter of whom is a Grammy Award-winning jazz drummer. In addition to these patron saints of groove, from bebop to modal, fusion and back, Jacksonville is still "bad" in the best way with special thanks to some of the area's most innovative yet true to form (or, occasionally, free-form) artists.

Through the last few years, Duval's jazz bands have made a name for themselves across the Southeast, playing gigs that include concert halls, weddings, city events, the Jacksonville Jazz Festival, and many more. The talent behind these bands are local whirlwinds of optimism and effortless cool that keep the music going; one of which is none other than DeAndre Lettsome. "I love the scene in Jax. It's filled with some truly amazing musicians and people. My favorite part about it is there doesn't ever really feel like there's unhealthy competition between musicians...it feels like a true community," said the saxophonist for the 11-strong dozen-strong Let's Ride Brass Band. Lettsome, who also placed 4th in the 2020 Carithian International Jazz Saxophone Competition, has been playing jazz since age 8 and got more involved in the scene when he entered college.

For Lettsome, jazz is a fun and professional vector for expression, a sentiment and co-founder of the group, Paul Jackson, echoed. "We have had some of the baddest cats come out of Jacksonville!" He founded the current incarnation of his band 3 years ago based with a desire to "put a light on the horns" and to depart from the typical norms and lineup of the traditional jazz band. With over 14 years of experience as an established trumpet player under his belt, Jackson wants to make jazz more accessible and continue Jacksonville's trek to revitalized recognition. "Our show is always a party! Bringing the New Orleans second line mixed with the Southern Duval Vibe, we call it "That Duval Sound!"...not only are we trying to bring a more modern approach to jazz, but we are trying to bring the "vibe" back! It should be fun! Our horns are our voices!" Jackson offers an uplifting sense of unity among jazz artists in the area and his bandmate, Lettsome, couldn't agree more. One of the most notable aspects of the scene, he said, is the collaborative and encouraging atmosphere it offers. "Musicians here cheer other musicians on, and I don't ever see, with the exception of a few cases."

In fact, many artists and bands make up a tight-knit community. Some of Let's Ride Brass Band's contemporaries and musical colleagues include The Band Be Easy, a 904-based jazz collective (who Folio readers voted Best Jazz Band in our Best of Jax 2020 issue). Robert Bidwell, who currently plays trumpet with the band, has observed a greater following within the community over the last few years. "Since I've been living here and playing jazz music, I've seen growth. Something that I've heard a couple of friends say is that the music scene out here is not a competition, there's a gig for everybody." As a musician who has toured globally and played trumpet for over 15 years, Bidwell takes pride in the unique sense of innovation and inclusivity within his scene. "I truly have a family out here. I'm surrounded by people who are passionate and continue to transform this music scene into something truly beautiful."

As musicians continue to hype each other up and promote their craft, what can fans expect next as the scene evolves? Though many have positive prospects, there lays an air of uncertainty, particularly with performance spaces. "To be honest, I don't know what the future holds for the Jax music scene," Lettsome said. "The caliber of musicians here is such that I believe it will continue to be a great place in terms of musicianship, however, I don't know if the city will ever have venues like Smalls in New York or the Jazz Corner in Hilton Head...I hope we do because, this city, in my opinion, has a sound that needs to be heard and cultivated." Like Lettsome, Bidwell believes Jacksonville has a special, tailored tone worth sharing. "I recommend anyone who just wants to see what the scene is looking like to come out and listen. It's remarkable, the talent that comes out of the city." All 3 are determined to keep the jams going, reaching across broad audiences beachside to streetside. "The future is bright and we are super excited to continue to share our original music and write our story...LET'S RIDE!" Jackson declared.

So, folks, you heard it here first: the heart of Jacksonville jazz and its polyphonic pulse persists, so next time you're out on the town, listen a little closer--you might just hear that Duval Sound.

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