

review music

this week's essential reading

'How a traditional rhythm is shaping today's most exciting new music' by Adam Harper, The Fader

'[Tresillo] spreads across the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa ... its descendants meet and collaborate, now using recordings and drum machines'



There is a capacity of about 120 at the Village Vanguard, New York – the same since 1935. 'But we're not a museum and we don't want to be,' says Deborah Gordon, who runs the club. Courtesy Village Vanguard

Small venue, big noise

It's by no means the largest jazz club in the world but for 80 years the Village Vanguard has attracted giant names and been the setting for more than 100 live-album recordings, writes [Andy Battaglia](#)

There is no room more synonymous with a musical sound than the Village Vanguard. For many decades crucial to the history of jazz, the small basement hideaway has played home to nearly every major player in the genre, and unlike so much else in New York, it remains a classic – untouched by the forces that turn destinations into tourist traps and sap the character that made them favourites in the first place.

This year the Village Vanguard celebrates its 80th birthday – and it's all the better for its age.

The club opened in New York's downtown neighbourhood of Greenwich Village in 1935, originally as a place for poets and artists to convene. "There was always music – there was always jazz – but it was not the main event," said Deborah Gordon, whose father Max started the Vanguard and ran it until his death in 1989. The balance tilted decidedly jazz-ward by the late 1950s, and the music has called the club home ever since.

There has been a lot of it. In addition to the nightly performance schedule – two sets per night, seven nights a week – the Vanguard has served as the setting for more than 100 live-album recordings, some of them keystone classics in the canon of jazz. *Sonny Rollins's A Night at the Village Vanguard*, *John Coltrane's Live! at the Village Vanguard*, *Bill*

Evans's Sunday at the Village Vanguard – the list of seminal recordings is legion and the rite of recording there continues in the present day.

"I call it the Carnegie Hall of jazz because most jazz clubs just don't have the sound that place has," pianist Jason Moran once said, echoing the sentiment of many. Comparisons to Carnegie Hall end there, however. A big part of the Vanguard's charm is how small it is – and how far removed from the realm of the glamorous and the fancy. After descending a set of stairs from the street level on Seventh Avenue, beneath a neon sign and an iconic red awning (temporarily removed but coming back after nearby construction work is complete), the club-goer takes a seat at one of many tightly packed tables and booths. Capacity is approximately 120, with room on the bandstand for just a few more.

Up there, only slightly raised above the floor with the audience, is heaven for a jazz musician, pianist Bill Charlap said before a show at the Vanguard last week. "Because of some sort of freak of nature in the shape of the room, we as players hear each other incredibly well," he explained. "Besides the ghosts and the vibes in the place, that is one of the reasons that performances are at a pinnacle. Jazz is all about reflexes – like boxing." He was there, in the back corner at the bar, to watch a set by his wife, a fellow pianist named Renee Rosnes. She and her band ripped through a set of originals and old hallmarks like *Jitterbug Waltz*, a tune composed by Fats Waller in 1942. Little about the setting was different

than it would have been decades ago.

Acoustic sounds wandered around the room, warm and full. A red curtain hung still behind the stage. Glasses clinked with ice keeping drinks cold.

The sound was traditional and well within convention but smart and searching too – by no means the kind of overly smooth schmaltz that stands in too often for all of contemporary jazz.

"Our modest vision of ourselves in that equation is that we don't really dictate it: we just try to keep our ears to the ground, with a bottom line of integrity," said Jed Eisenman, who books much of the performance schedule at the Vanguard. "The music changes. It's gone back and forth since the Vanguard has been around. I hope we're confusing people, in a good way. If you want to look for what is valid and exciting and real in jazz, you can't just keep hashing out the same stuff."

There is no way to misconstrue the heritage, though. Photographs on the walls serve as a gallery of the greatest of the form: Thelonious Monk, Pharoah Sanders, Charlie Haden. A poster from the 1970s evangelises for Thad Jones and Mel Lewis in Russian, from a tour of the Soviet Union organised as a matter of cultural diplomacy by the US State Department.

In the office, grimmer mementos hang in the form of newspaper obituaries of recently deceased jazz greats and regulars at the club. Last week, conversation turned to the need to make more space for Ornette Coleman, a jazz master who died at the age of 85.

"I certainly value the history," said Gordon, who works with her 92-year-old mother Lorraine to keep the Vanguard alive in its ageless state.

"Part of what I do is to guard that in a city that changes constantly. But we're not a museum, and we don't want to be. It's a real living place that responds and tries to keep up the name 'Vanguard!'"

The next night, as the lights went down for the first set by Rosnes and her band, the atmosphere felt transported through time. Spectres of the past were unmistakable – this is a room where Miles Davis hung out! – but appreciation of them could only happen in a present as active and alive as any time ever. Piano keys started tinkling. A bass line lit up. There was a rumble from the drums. It was time for another night of jazz in a venue more important to the question than anywhere else.

Questioned about the potential for changes that could stand to ruin all of that, Gordon was collected and cool. "I'm enjoying myself," she said. "The Vanguard is thriving. We're having a good time. We're thankful that people still like to come here. What more can you ask for?"

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in The Wall Street Journal, Frieze, The Paris Review and more.



The world's greatest jazz musicians have played the Village Vanguard – including Miles Davis. AP Photo

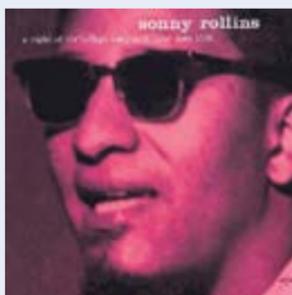
▶ the playlist three classic performances from one legendary club

A Night at the Village Vanguard

Sonny Rollins

(Blue Note/EMI, 1957)

Recorded in two sessions and on just one day at the club, this shows Rollins's unpredictable style. Originally released as separate albums, the complete release shows a tenor sax maestro at his peak.



Live! at the Village Vanguard

John Coltrane

(Impulse! Records, 1961)

This was Coltrane's first live album, and the first with the classic quartet. Recorded over four nights, it features "Chasin' the Trane", described as one of the most important recordings in jazz.



Sunday at the Village Vanguard

Bill Evans

(Riverside, 1961)

This is notable for being the final performance of the Evans trio of himself, Scott LaFaro, the bassist, and drummer Paul Motian. LaFaro died in a car accident shortly after; it is regarded as one of jazz's greatest.

