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Jazz Etc. / Paul de Barros

Cjazz Lounge: smooth moves on Eastside

Jazz venues keep sprouting up on the Eastside like new subdivisions.

To Bake's Place and Eastside Jazz (which presents at Sherman Clay) add the spiffy new Cjazz Lounge, a smooth-jazz dinner room at the Hyatt Regency Bellevue.

Tonight at 9, Tony Gable & 206 plays the new venue at 900 Bellevue Way N.E. (\$15; 425-698-4350).

The Cjazz Lounge is former smooth-jazz radio deejay Michele Abrams' baby, a project she has wanted to bring into the world for some time.

"I want to enjoy jazz," says the longtime Eastsider, "but I don't necessarily want to cross the bridge. The time is right to bring live jazz to the Eastside."

A year-and-a-half ago, after presenting successful shows by saxophonist Eric Marienthal and Euge Groove at the Kirkland Performance Center, she decided it was time to make her move.

Abrams is particularly passionate about smooth jazz, the mildly funky, easy-listening brand of instrumental music that trumps straight-ahead jazz in radio play and record sales. Back in 1994, she started a smooth-jazz Web site (www.cjazz.com) that's still going strong, providing information, selling discs and promoting shows.

The smooth-jazz audience is largely upscale and suburban, so the hotel's Eques dining room — linen service, floral carpet, potted plants — feels right. Two weeks ago, saxophonist Darren Motamedy's band squeezed onto the compact alcove stage, as 60 or so diners took in the show.

Sightlines are mostly good, and the sound system is crisp — not too loud, but not background level, either. There is no piano, but most smooth-jazz groups use electric keyboards, so that's not a problem.

The 90-seat main room is reserved for diners (Northwest/Asian fusion menu), where the \$15 cover charge and dinner for two will easily run to \$100; 45 seats with no cover are available in the adjacent bar.

Abrams thinks a flush crowd is thirsting for what she's got on tap.

"The hotel has corporate visitors with expense accounts," she says. "And the Eastside has an affluent audience."

She does realize, however, that the Cjazz Lounge will have to grow if she wants to bring in national acts, which cost a lot. She hopes a March renovation at the Hyatt Regency will allow the club to expand.

Meantime, you can hear the best of local smooth jazzers there.

Percussionist Gable, who toured four years with Kenny G, leads a delightful group, as evidenced on his most recent three-song disc, "Summer '01."

The band's "Catina" and "Camano Island" get regular airplay on local smooth-jazz radio. With guitarist Glenn Lorbiecki, Heart drummer Ben Smith and sax man Dean Mochizuki, 206 plays clean lines with a soulful, romantic feel, texturized by Gable's congas.

Here's the December Cjazz Lounge lineup (music is on Thursdays): Michael Powers, this Thursday; Mark McMillen, Dec. 9; Colelition, Dec. 16; Tom Grant, Dec. 31.

It will be interesting to see what effect, if any, this new room has on Jazz Alley, which started booking smooth jazz a few years ago.

Meanwhile, Taj Mahal is at the Alley through Sunday, with his trio.

Taj's musical curiosity has led him all over the African diaspora and beyond, but he's sticking to blues and Caribbean fare this time.

Last Friday, wearing his trademark red shoes, straw hat and floral shirt, the whimsical guitar man delightfully finger-picked his way through "Creole Belle" and slid surreptitiously into some sexy slow drags, prompting howls of glee from the packed house. Naturally, along the way he also stopped off at "Corinna" and "Fishin' Blues," as well.

A great blues interpreter, Taj comes across as too lighthearted to have a real hurt on. But when he's skipping over Caribbean seas, he feels like the real deal.

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