

Cafe Hon brings jazz music back to Hampden

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If you need an escape, just west of campus you can choose to lose yourself in the boutiques, cafes and thrift stores, and find yourself welcomed into the small community of Hampden. On Thursday nights, you can also enjoy live jazz at Cafe Hon, on 1003 W. 36th Street.

Cafe Hon, named after the term of affection often used by the stereotypical bee-hived cat-glasses-wearing women of Baltimore, is a fixture in the Hampden neighborhood. With its humongous plastic flamingo outside, and 1950's style counter inside, it is certainly hard to miss. It is best known for its 2 eggs, 2 sausages, 2 pancakes - cooked just like mom makes it at home (if your mom cooks delicious breakfast, and transforms into a wine bar).

It is in this definitively more jazzy scene that The Michael Raitzyk Trio, featuring Michael Raitzyk on guitar, Percy White on electric and acoustic bass, and Jesse "Jay" Moody on drums, sets up to play for the night. The Trio specializes in a versatile array of original songs and classic jazz standards. Raitzyk is one of Baltimore's leading guitarists. He currently plays around the big band scene as well as some klezmer-jazz projects. His playing style is fast, rhythmic, and bluesy. The Trio began the night with some groove-jazz jams, featuring some very impressive guitar and drum solos, and energetic and highly interactive group playing.

Throughout the night, White would switch from electric to acoustic bass to add a different dynamic to the sound. Moody, working the drum set, kept the evening swinging with in-the-pocket shuffles, groovy funk beats, and sharp responses to musical ideas he picked up from the guitar and bass. Though they are each skilled at their instruments, they played some tunes that were a little too reminiscent of "smooth jazz" for my taste, reminding me of Branford Marsalis' newer records, or some of Pat Metheny's trio albums. It wasn't until the end of the night that the musicians exuded some raw emotion, making the music more interesting and energetic.

One thing that is really admirable about this band is how welcoming they are. Young musicians can come to Cafe Hon to "cut their teeth," or "sit in," and play a few tunes. The band is friendly and open-minded to musicians who are interested in bringing their instrument with them to the show to acquire perhaps the most important aspect of playing jazz -- experiences from the bandstand.

Raitzyk invited one of his students to sit in for the funk-jazz classic Red Clay (Freddie Hubbard), and they were enthusiastic enough to invite me to play upright bass on some blues and bebop tunes. The three members of the band have a profound knowledge of jazz, and intend to pass that knowledge on to younger generations who come to listen or participate.

The people at Cafe Hon on a Thursday night are mainly young professionals, some high school and college students interested in the music, and a few of Hampden's artists and small business owners. The atmosphere is talkative and upbeat, yet relaxed. Friends and couples fill the bar and the surrounding tables drinking, laughing, and sometimes just listening to the music. The band is set up just inside the front door, and can be seen and heard through the window just outside.

If you need to get away from campus, get your mind off of midterms or the usual crowd, Hamden may be the place for you. It doesn't cost anything to go exploring, yet it is often difficult to resist buying an old Miles Davis record from an antique store, or a sweet vintage suite from a thrift store, a delicious "Avenue Breakfast," or a glass of wine to sip as you listen to live jazz at Cafe Hon.