

journeys
bon voyage
trekking
getaways

excursions

escapes
travel
near and far

Music and Theater Live in the Suburbs

JANET MENDELSON **writer**



SCOTT BUMP

the most exciting live music we heard this year was not in one of Boston's prestigious halls, or in a sports stadium, a pricey urban nightclub, or under a huge harborside tent. No, the most exciting live music we've heard this year took place in a former suburban fire station. When multiple Grammy Award-winner Stanley Clarke took the stage at **THE CENTER FOR ARTS IN NATICK**, known as TCAN ("tee-can") with two dynamic musicians, both younger than 25, on percussion and piano, the trio's creative energy electrified the room. Clarke is a jazz legend. Like everyone else in the audience, we were close enough to see Clarke's extraordinary finger work on standup and electric bass. We could read every emotion in his face. To our left was a couple who had driven up from Connecticut. On our right were several professional jazz musicians. Between numbers, their collective comments amounted to "Wow."

Acoustically excellent performing arts venues in Boston's suburbs like TCAN draw those in the know from all over. Their modest ticket prices, convenient locations, free parking,

*The Center for Arts
in Natick (TCAN)*

excursions

“the trio’s creative energy electrified the room”



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comfortable seating, clear sightlines, and diverse schedules featuring national and regional artists attract audiences who come for the show, not just to socialize or take selfies with the stage as backdrop.

“During the 1990s, there was a real absence of live music in Metrowest,” says David Lavalley, TCAN executive director. “TCAN grew out of a church coffeehouse. Its first dedicated space was a downtown Natick storefront that seated 60. At the same time, Natick Mall was being re-developed and the new tax revenue enabled the town to replace its aging Central Fire Station, built in 1875. There was talk of putting a parking lot in its place. Instead, a group of local citizens purchased the building from the town and raised funds for a venue for regional and national musicians, theater groups, and artists.”

Following a \$2.5 million restoration, TCAN opened in 2003 as a nonprofit venue that now offers more than 300 events and classes annually. The historic building retains its retro feel, with brick walls, high ceilings, and four arched bays, transformed into a contemporary 290-seat performance space with a gallery for work by regional artists.

“Over the last 30 to 40 years, there have been fewer and fewer places for live music because it is very difficult to make viable as a business,” said Lavalley. “Costs are high. Our 501(c)(3) nonprofit status means we’re able to raise money through donations to keep ticket prices low and available to a wide range of people.”

More than 24,000 people attended TCAN performances in 2013. Fifty-nine percent were from Metrowest. More than 4,000 came from central and western Massachusetts, other New England states, and New York and New Jersey. In addition to a paid staff of six, the venue relies on nearly 200 volunteers who usher, raise funds and business sponsorships, and staff the box office and membership drives.

Comedy, blues, jazz, folk, alternative, classical, children’s, rock, pop, New Age, roots and country, community theater—it’s all here. Among 75 performances in the past 18 months were regional talents and such boldface names as Tom Rush, Peter Wolf, Leo Kottke, Borromeo String Quartet, James Montgomery, Rickie Lee Jones, and comedian Sandra Bernhard. The tribute band Beatlejuice was here, as were Dave



PHOTOS BY SCOTT BUMP

Davies of The Kinks, Loudon Wainwright III, and multi-genre harpist Deborah Henson-Conant.

Tuesday night Folk/Acoustic Open Mic, held monthly, has had a loyal following since 1997. Rock Off Main Street, a staple for 15 years and sponsored by Berklee College of Music Summer Programs, features young teens. The TCAN Players present three plays a year. Family programs include classes for children and popular entertainers like Ben Rudnick & Friends, and Karen K and The Jitterbugs.

“TCAN has transformed Downtown Natick,” says Tim LePain, a longtime Natick resident who serves on TCAN’s Finance Committee. “Restaurants do better because of it, galleries have opened, and largely because of it Massachusetts has designated the Natick Center Cultural District as one of 25 in the state.”

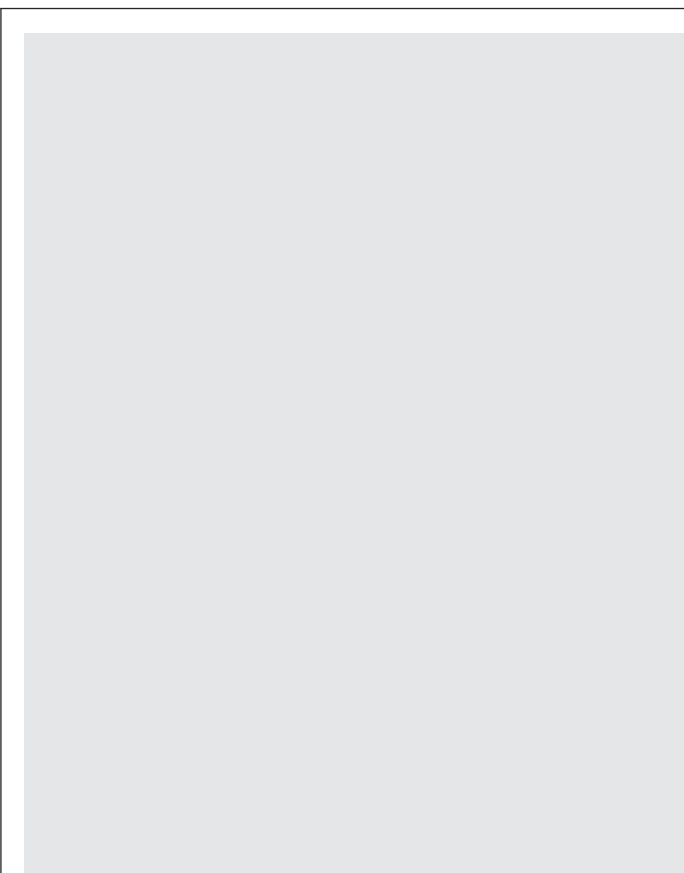
Movies are a coming attraction. A \$1.2 million capital campaign is underway to renovate the building’s second floor as a 160-seat digital screening room. “We’ll program it like an art house cinema, like the Coolidge Corner,” Lavalley says. “We’ll screen animation, short subjects, and independent films. It will also benefit our expanding partnership with Walnut Hill School for the Arts, particularly their new Writing, Film and Media Arts Program.” A partnership with the internationally known school in Natick includes a six-week intensive theater workshop for teens at TCAN taught by Walnut Hill faculty.

Act III

Eighteen years ago, Gwenn Vivian, who studied jazz piano at Berklee College of Music, decided instead to focus on the business side of enter-

left: Stanley Clarke, middle: Buckwheat Zydeco, right: Joan Osborne

tainment. She opened the Acton Jazz Café first in the basement of an industrial building, later moving it to a less-than-hip shopping center in the same town. Despite being 30 miles outside Boston, the club earned a spot on *DownBeat* magazine’s list of great international jazz and blues venues five years in a row. “That’s how we get a lot of European tourists



excursions “joyous roomful of singing, laughing friends”

who know about us,” Vivian says. “Jazz has a much bigger audience in Europe and Japan than it has in the US where it was born.”

This fall, the venue moved again, to a mid-1800s farmhouse in Littleton. With the new location comes a new name, **ACT III**.

While live jazz, blues, Latin, and folk music are still the core, food and drink were always part of the mix. Act III alters the recipe with Turkish-born chef Joseph Alptekin running a more upscale dining operation, featuring mostly Mediterranean cuisine for lunch, dinner, and Sunday buffet brunch. “This is a place for people who love music,” Vivian says. “But there’s no money in clubs. The restaurant and bar are the bread and butter that allow me to pay musicians what they deserve.”

The guiding principle here is a belief that live music creates a relationship between musicians playing and listeners listening. Act III is intimate; seating 30 in the dining room and 25 in a bar that Vivian hopes will attract a younger crowd to jazz. In an unusual layout, the venue co-mingles with Gallery 529, an artist’s cooperative. You enter

near the bar, a handsome room with dark woodwork, deep red walls, and a gold ceiling, then walk through the art gallery to reach the combined performance space and dining room where picture windows overlook gardens and an outdoor patio.

There’s light music through dinner but no cover charge until 9:00 pm when shows begin. Vivian, a vocalist who heads her own quintet, says that nearly every musician she books teaches at Berklee or the New England Conservatory of Music, or is a national artist on tour. Continuing longstanding Acton Jazz Café traditions, there’s Blues Jam on Thursday nights, Folk Open Mic on Tuesday evenings, and Jazz Jam every Sunday from 4:00 to 9:00 pm.

Firehouse Center for the Arts

FIREHOUSE CENTER FOR THE ARTS in Newburyport is another repurposed historic building, rescued by local citizens who gave it a vibrant new life. Last July in the brick-walled theater, Bellevue Cadillac, a

Suburban Live Music Venues

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14 Summer Street, Natick

508.647.0097

www.natickarts.org

The Center for Arts in Natick



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left: Grace Kelly, right: Jimmy Vaughan



sometimes outrageous jazz and swing band, turned a capacity crowd of adults into joyous roomful of singing, laughing friends. Trumpeters bobbed and weaved, the trombonist swooped and soared. It felt like New Orleans had come north.

“Firehouse is a real success story,” says Beth Falconer, managing director of the venue that opened in 1991. “It saved something beautiful downtown that everyone can enjoy. It engages people of all ages who find a home here, from our Senior Readers to [volunteers] giving backstage support. They can direct a show, usher, or be in the audience. It gives community members access to all the arts, sharing something that will never happen exactly that way again.”

The nonprofit 501(c)(3) Firehouse annually presents some 200 dance, theater, film, and music events. Its production of *39 Steps* swept regional community theater awards last year. People 55 and over in the Senior Readers Program work with a professional actor on scripts, addressing issues of limited mobility and memory and performing three times a year at the Firehouse and nearby assisted living places.

Built in 1823 as a market house and lyceum, the building in its early days hosted such notable speakers as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Daniel Webster. It was Newburyport’s Central Fire Station from the mid-1800s until 1980. Now the 195-seat theater and two-level art gallery, adjacent to a busy waterfront park, restaurants, and shops, are the heart of the seaport.

“One of the things that’s difficult about managing arts organizations, whether nonprofit or commercial, is building a future audience that will choose to make live performance a part of their lives,” says Beth Falconer. In suburban Boston, these venues are doing their part to make that happen. [ww](#)

