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Looking for jazz gigs in New York

By: Camilo Gomez

Every Thursday night at Bite, a café on East 14th Street that can seat a dozen people, the same scene takes place. Yuki Futami, 27, arrives and pushes away a table in the corner next to the window. He sets up a large electric-piano keyboard. Then his two bandmates arrive and position themselves next to the keyboard, with drums and a bass. Even though they're in a corner, with no space to walk around them, their presence reduces the café’s seating capacity by one-fourth.

The trio tunes, warms up and decides what to play. Jazz fills the room. Traffic noises and distant sirens stream in as customers enter and leave.

“It’s hard to find a place where we can play regularly,” Futami says. “So I think I’m very lucky because I can practice every Thursday, even though it is background music.”

Futami is one of many jazz musicians who come to New York City looking to further their skills, through schooling or performing. When it comes to finding places to play gigs, competition is fierce.

“Even talented musician is hard to find jobs here,” says Futami.

More than 33,000 jazz musicians live in the New York metropolitan area, according to a 2001 study commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts. That’s 1.8 jazz musicians per 1,000 inhabitants.

However, there is no updated register for the number of jazz performers, unlike those in other professions, in New York City. Even nationwide, little data is available. The Bureau of Labor Statistics has a category for musicians and singers, but it does not break it down by musical genre and doesn’t include musicians who are self-employed.

“There’s a lot of clubs, but at the same time, the number of musicians is bigger,” says Gabriel Guerrero, 37, a jazz pianist based in Queens who has been living and working in New York for eight years. “It’s like, you have to wait in line.”

Hot House, a New York City magazine specializing in jazz, lists 223 venues in its website for live jazz in Manhattan alone, including clubs, restaurants and bars, but also music schools and concert halls. The spectrum runs from Carnegie Hall at the high end to dozens of cafés and restaurants with live background music. Yet it is hard for a musician to find a steady gig, let alone one that pays well.
“Getting the gigs isn’t usually about your talent,” says Marianne Solivan, 38, a jazz singer and educator. “It’s about how much hard work and hustle you put into it.”

Carnegie Hall’s first jazz concert took place in 1912. The city has been a hotbed of jazz since the big bands of the Roaring ‘20s, moving through bebop in the mid-20th century and cool jazz in the 1970s. Today, New York still attracts musicians from other parts of the country and the world.

Futami used to play in his native Japan. He moved to New York a year ago with the hope of entering the jazz program at the Juilliard School; its music division has 600 students from more than 40 countries. But because of his limited proficiency in English, he said, he was not admitted to the program.

He is reapplying after studying English for a year at La Guardia Community College in Queens. Every evening—except Thursdays, when he plays at Bite—he books a small room with a piano in the school’s music wing.

“I come here every day because I don’t have a piano in my house,” he says, gazing at the white walls of the windowless room where he practices for six hours at a time. “I’m pushing myself, you know.”

In New York City, most jazz musicians work more than one job, and sometimes that means working at something other than playing music. There is also no standard fee for a jazz musician’s gig.

“If you’re doing restaurant work,” says Solivan, “it can be anywhere from $50 to $200 per person, for the evening, per band member. Outside of that, it can go from there upwards to the thousands.”

Teaching is often a parallel source of income for performers. Solivan teaches singing at City College, and though she likes it, she says she doesn’t want to sing just on the side.

“Once you tip the balance of doing that other thing more than the actual art that you want to be doing, I think it starts to really become a battle,” she said. “And I think in New York you see a lot of people fighting that battle.”

At the end of November, Futami met with his trio at a studio in midtown Manhattan to record three jazz standards for his Juilliard application. After the last chord, he stood up, turned off the recorder he had set on top of the piano and, with a smile, lifted his arms.

“Yeah!” he said. “We finished.”

He expects to hear back from Juilliard next spring.