



Winter 2019

GERMANO'S: MORE THAN A JAZZ CLUB

By
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When I first came to Baltimore a few months ago, I began looking for a jam session where I would be welcome to play. I found it at Germano's in Little Italy on Sunday nights. There, friends and strangers and players at all levels pursue the repertoire of modern jazz with intensity but without judgmental recriminations—a rare combination.

The jam session, begun just this year by bassist Ian Rashkin and guitarist Michael Banham (a.k.a. "Mike & Ike"), reflects the overall tone of Germano's, which is more than a bar, restaurant, and performance space. It is a community institution that builds connections among people.

The cabaret is a particularly remarkable example. It provides about 250 shows per year that range from students getting a chance to test new skills, to neighbors from the local community performing for their friends, to emerging artists who come for open mike every third Wednesday, to top-notch professionals including jazz musicians, cabaret performers, bluegrass players, and even a bit of opera.

Despite the variety, jazz played at a very high level is central to the Germano's experience. That is because Cyd Wolf, the wife of Germano Fabiani, the founder of the restaurant, manages the cabaret. She told me, "I developed a passion for jazz when I was in college. I was a rock and roller, but when I heard jazz, it became my main musical passion. Now I book some of the best jazz performers in the world, but especially Baltimore-based groups such as the Cold Springs Jazz Quartet, the Glenn Angus Quartet, Billy Colucci, and many more."

Cyd also told me that—unlike theatre, concerts, and large clubs—the Cabaret at Germano's is designed to be an "intimate" setting where the performers and the audience are physically close to one another (no raised stage) and can literally interact.

Performers I spoke with confirmed that sense of intimacy. Jake Ruth, an excellent young guitarist who recently performed at Germano's for the first

time, said, "I love the room. It's a great setup with a great piano. People listen. I can connect with the crowd." Gary Rubin, who has cultivated his skills as a jazz vocalist after retiring as a Vice-President at Towson University, said "What is important to me is the opportunity to express myself and connect with people. I get to do that when I perform at Germano's. I also feel released from the troubled world outside and get to feel good about life. "And," he added, "the food is terrific!"

As Jake noted, the Cabaret has a wonderful grand piano, which—unlike many contemporary venues—is always in tune. And the room is quiet during performances, making it possible for the audience to hear the performers and for the performers to feel connected with each other and with their audience.

Germano's is located at the corner of Fawn and High Streets in the heart of Little Italy. Downstairs to the left of the Fawn Street entrance, there is a bar/restaurant that seats about 40 people. That is where the Sunday jam sessions are held. To the right there is a small narrow room that seats about 20 people. Upstairs there are two rooms. One handles overflow from the restaurant downstairs and is available for private parties. The other is the Cabaret, which holds as few as 20 and as many as 80 people—making its intimacy possible. (Unfortunately, it is up a steep staircase and not handicapped accessible.)

Germano's began as a restaurant in 1978. It added the cabaret 30 years later, but despite its growth into a cultural center, it has remained committed to, and takes pride in, providing excellent food at fair prices.

Germano's also plays a major role in the community of Little Italy. Cyd and Germano are active members of the Little Italy Neighborhood Association and organizers of cultural events, including the Italian Heritage Festival and the Little Italy Madonnari Arts Festival, which brings street art and jazz to Little Italy each year. Gifted international artists compete for the best chalk drawings on the streets of Little Italy, and their 2-D and 3-D work is stunning. The Baltimore Jazz Alliance is a co-presenter of the Madonnari Arts Festival and organizes jazz performances for the festival that are sponsored by local music venues, restaurants, including Germano's, and businesses.

So Germano's is a great place for jazz. The weekly jam session is lively and sociable. The cabaret provides an intimate performance experience for first rate professional jazz musicians and their audiences. But Germano's is more than a good restaurant and jazz venue. It is truly a community institution—devoted to Little Italy as well as to the community of artists of Baltimore.



Cyd Wolf and Germano Fabiani

photo by Michael B Friedman