

Jam Sessions at the Blue Room: Newport Jazz, cool vibes, and plenty of new talent

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By **Veronica Bruno** Updated November 8, 2023, 6:00 a.m.



Leland Baker performs with the house band — Matt Marcus on piano, Lumanyano Mzi on drums, and Brayden Beason on bass — on Oct. 25, 2023, at the first of Newport Jazz Festival's new Jam Sessions at The Blue Room in Cranston, R.I. RAFAEL MEDINA

NEWPORT, R.I. – For many, Newport is synonymous with Gilded Age mansions, sailing, tennis, and the iconic summertime Folk and Jazz music festivals. Now, the organization behind the acclaimed Newport Jazz Festival is working to bring jazz to audiences in other parts of Rhode Island – and hopefully inspire the next generation of musicians as well.

“There are incredibly talented musicians here and there is a scene happening,” said Dan Swain, the Director of Programs and Development for Newport Festivals Foundation. “We felt like we had more of a responsibility to work year-round to try and cultivate that scene and help highlight the talent that’s here and give those jazz musicians a space where they can come jam, hang out with each other and network with each other, and perform for Rhode Islanders and people in the community.”

Inspired by the North End Entertainment open-mic sessions at the Firehouse Theater in Newport, Swain and the foundation’s new Music Education Manager, Leland Baker, launched a new initiative: [Jam Sessions at The Blue Room](#) in Cranston, R.I.



Dan Swain, left, Director of Programs and Development with Newport Festivals Foundation, and Leland Baker, Music Education Manager for Newport Festivals Foundation, pose for a photo at Fort Adams in Newport, R.I., on Nov. 3, 2023. MATTHEW HEALEY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

“We’re big fans of the NEE jams,” Swain, 31, said. “We looked into the [jazz] community and said, ‘Is there anything like this going on that we could support?’” he recalled. There wasn’t, so they decided, “Well, we should just do it ourselves.”

Baker, 34, an R&B enthusiast who took up the saxophone at age 14, relished the idea of tapping into the jazz scene in the greater Providence area.

“There are inspiring young jazz artists, practitioners, enthusiasts,” said Baker. “So just creating a space for the community to go and indulge in preserving this art and learning to get their voices heard, it was a no-brainer.”

“If you think about the beginnings of this music, it is Black American music and there were only certain places black people could congregate and be free and not be harassed,” Baker noted. “And for artists that was important, that helped jazz spread up and down the Mississippi, throughout the rest of the country.”

The Jam Sessions also offer a way to honor the origins of the Newport Jazz Festival. George Wein, who founded the festival in the 1950s, had run a Boston jazz club called Storyville in the 1940s.

“Eventually, people from Newport came to him and said, ‘You should do a festival out here in Newport,’” Swain explained. “I think this program is in line with George’s legacy, too, because his club was instrumental in growing jazz at that time.”

“I think George would be proud of this program,” Swain added.



Alisha Pina performs on Oct. 25, 2023, at the first of Newport Jazz Festival's new Jam Sessions at The Blue Room in Cranston, R.I. (Rafael Medina) RAFAEL MEDINA

Baker took the stage himself during the first Jam Session at the Blue Room on Oct. 25, performing with The Blue Room's house band: Matt Marcus on piano, Lumanyano Mzi on drums, and Brayden Beason on bass.

"It's a beautiful space," Baker said. "I mean, at the stage, they have a backline that you don't get in a lot of clubs here in Rhode Island. They have their own drum set and piano."

The Blue Room's owner, Jen Minuto, "immediately understood the value in providing a community space for musicians from around the jam," Swain said.

The new venture can help the foundation reach a different crowd than the one that frequents the Newport Jazz Festival, Swain and Baker noted.

"Not everybody likes to be outside in the summer and not everyone likes to be in big crowds," Swain said.

The Jam Sessions will meet [at the Blue Room](#) in Cranston on the second and fourth Wednesdays of each month, and will feature a different artist each week. Local musicians will be able to join them to jam, learning and exploring works by jazz luminaries such as Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Thelonious Monk. The next session is Nov. 8 from 9 p.m. to midnight, and musicians of all ages and levels are welcome.

“The house band will play a short set and then we’ll open it up to all musicians, who are encouraged to play a song from [Monk’s repertoire],” Baker said.

“One thing we would love to see happen — and we did see happen at the first one — is really young kids playing with the older community as well because we don’t really get that a lot,” Swain said. “That is everything to us.”

Performing isn’t required at the jam sessions. Jazz enthusiasts can attend and simply enjoy the atmosphere, listen to new interpretations of well-known pieces, and grab a drink. Who knows? You might get to hear a jazz talent before they make it to the Newport Jazz Festival.

“Our dream is that someday someone’s going to be headlining the Newport Jazz stage, and they’re going to say, ‘Well, I started out at these jazz jams that they did back in 2023,’” Swain said. “That’s the big dream.”

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