

Pita Jungle Jam marks 15 years of jazz in Chandler



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(Photo: Provided by the artist)

It was 15 years ago this month that Pita Jungle in Chandler took a chance on jazz with the introduction of a weekly Thursday Jungle Jam. And it's still going strong.

Pete Gitlin, who plays guitar and bass at the weekly jams, has been on board since the beginning.

"For any musical gig to last 15 years is remarkable," Gitlin says. "So all credit goes to the owners of Pita Jungle who have supported us, supported the music. I think it's become a tradition for them and it's just been enormous fun."

There have been changes in the personnel of the core band through the years, Gitlin says. "But I've been there all 15 years. I keep telling everyone I started when I was 21 but that would be not true."

The lineup celebrating 15 years of Jungle Jams this week is rounded out by pianist Dave Ihlenfeld and drummer Cleve Huff.

Their weekly jam was started because Thursdays were kind of an off night for the restaurant at that point. But as Gitlin recalls, "We had a lot of regulars who started coming in right at the start. We actually have people who have been coming for the entire 15 years. Of course not every week. But it took off fairly quickly because not only would their regular customers hear it and say, 'Hey, this is fun. I'm gonna come back,' musicians would come in and bring their friends and family. So it became a Thursday night tradition there."

Jungle Jams have attracted hundreds of musicians through the years, from high school students making their first live performance to Gitlin describes as the crème de la crème of the Valley jazz scene, including Judy Roberts, Tony Vanna, Renee Patrick, Stan Sorensen, Ted Sistrunk and Michael Collins.

"The most exciting night," Gitlin says, "was when Irvin Mayfield from New Orleans came in. Irvin is one of the world's most well-known and respected trumpeters and he was playing the Chandler Jazz Festival. He came in and jammed with the band, and we of course were all in awe because he's just such an incredible player. He couldn't have been more gracious."

Music teachers from local colleges, including Chandler Gilbert Community College and Mesa Community College often send their students to the Jungle Jam to write reports on what they hear.

"They come in to write a report," Gitlin says. "And they're hearing what jazz is like for the first time."

They've also hosted theme nights, from Oktubafest with Ihlenfeld moving to tuba to holiday jams in December, love songs for Valentine's Day, bossa nova nights, blues nights, even Beatles nights.

"We never know who's gonna show up," Gitlin says. "It's saxophone players and singers. We're always glad to have singers. Renee Patrick, who's one of the Valley's great entertainers, really got her start doing jazz at our jam nights. I think she'd been in pop bands and doing some rock stuff, but she started coming in 15 years ago, right at the start. And now she plays all over the Valley. The vast majority of what we do is jazz standards and sometimes we'll jazz up some pop songs. But it's jazz. We're just playing what we feel."

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