

Local music: The Dakota's recipe for success

Taking it to the street for its 25th birthday, the Twin Cities' venerable jazz club has loosened up and gotten it right.

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As he belled up to the bar for a lemonade, **Irv Williams** looked as comfortable as a guy kicking off his shoes after a day on the job. But he was actually just showing up to work.

"It's simply one of the best clubs I've ever worked," the 91-year-old saxophonist said last week before taking the stage for his Friday happy-hour gig at the Dakota. "They didn't spare a dime on getting the right sound in the room. And they treat everybody right."

Testimonials like that are commonplace at the Dakota -- Dakota Jazz Club & Restaurant, for you in the fancier set -- to the point where it gets to be pretty bland asking musicians about the internationally renowned Minneapolis club.

Clearly, though, the Dakota has done something right. Since its move crosstown from St. Paul to its present Nicollet Mall location in 2003, the club's reputation has prospered among foodies, jazz buffs and now even plenty of non-jazzy music buffs. Admittedly, you could count me in the latter crowd. I used to think the place was stuffy and pricey, but I've come around -- especially after visiting blander and pricier jazz clubs around the country (most overrated: the Blue Note in New York).

Kicking off its 25th anniversary celebrations with Sunday's Dakota Street Fest -- the indoor anniversary will peak Dec. 8-9 with the return of **McCoy Tyner** (insert jazz nerds' gasps here) -- the Dakota has a winning formula that merits explanation.

Here are the Dakota's best attributes:

1. Location, location, location. Moving out of Bandana Square in 2003 was a no-brainer. Only historians and model train buffs now remember that earlier location. "We couldn't have survived," said the club's co-owner and music guru, **Lowell Pickett**. But the present-day Nicollet Mall site wasn't a shoo-in. The mezzanine level had to be added, a major update. Also, the Dakota was being enticed to relocate to downtown St. Paul and also near the new Guthrie Theater site. "This is better," Pickett said. "We're near many hotels, and we're near another great arts institution, Orchestra Hall. And the room itself. ..."

2. Treats musicians like royalty. Booker T. & the MGs guitarist **Steve Cropper** explained last month why the Dakota is one of the few clubs on their itinerary: "They really take good care of us." Minutes later, a hand mysteriously appeared through the curtains from backstage and topped off Cropper's wine glass while he played.

You don't have to be a Rock and Roll Hall of Famer, though. The Dakota has a mostly shimmering reputation among local musicians, too. You'd be surprised how many clubs gain the opposite reputation (now-defunct rival Rossi's was one of them).

3. Treats the food like a rock star. Music wasn't even on the menu when the Dakota opened in 1985. Food is still the main draw in the eyes of a lot of restaurant critics after chef **Jack Riebel** took over in 2005. A meal isn't cheap, of course, and portions can be smallish, but it often has the same wow value as the performers.

4. Intimacy for your money. How many times have you gone to a concert and complained about bad sound or not being able to see? I don't think anyone has ever had such a gripe at the Dakota. But nearness comes at a price, based on simple math: Fewer tickets equal higher prices in order to pay a performer's usual fee. Asked about the criticism that tickets can be too expensive, Pickett said, "We're very

sensitive to that, especially in these economic times. We're constantly trying to find the perfect balance. And you'd be surprised how often we take a loss."

5. But not always expensive. You don't have to skip a car payment to enjoy a night at the Dakota. In fact, there seems to be one gig under \$20 for every two or three pricier shows, plus late-night shows on weekends are always \$5 to \$8. One of the best deals in my book is the Bad Plus' string of \$25 gigs around the holidays (which I've personally given out as Christmas presents).

6. Not just in a jazz funk anymore. Some jazz purists have balked at the broader booking scheme, which includes such upcoming shows as **Bettye Lavette** (Aug. 9), **Aimee Mann** (Sept. 13-15) and **Nick Lowe** (Oct. 10-11). These jazzless gigs help keep the place profitable more nights out of the month, though, and the Dakota has been very good about finding acts that fit the room -- and fit the idea of American music on the whole, in which jazz is obviously a cornerstone.

7. Dedication to the music. Whatever the style of performer, Pickett said, "We're all nuts for this stuff." The enthusiasm he and other staffers share for certain acts can be infectious. It can be a tad annoying, too, like when Pickett gave me a five-minute lecture on '70s jazz-fusion band the **Mahavishnu Orchestra** last Friday. To his credit, he was also very up on hot New Orleans newcomer **Glen David Andrews**, who performs at the street fest Saturday and then heads up a Gulf Coast benefit Sunday in the club.

8. Supports America's most musical city. In hindsight, it seems a bit like destiny that a clearly disheartened **Dr. John** happened to be playing the Dakota in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit home. After that, Pickett said, "We've made it a point to have at least one New Orleans act a month." Crescent City talent young and old is on display there this week, with Andrews, **Charmaine Neville** and **Bonerama** at Saturday's street fest (Neville also performs inside Friday night). The

Preservation Hall Jazz Band has its first-ever Dakota stint Monday and Tuesday.

Pickett hardly sees these bookings as charitable, though: "After Katrina, a lot of them couldn't make money at home, so they had to go somewhere else to do it. I'm glad they came here."