

Keyboardist Wayne Horvitz (left) performs at his club The Royal Room with saxophonist Skerik and cellist Peggy Lee.



ROYAL ROOM: SEATTLE STYLE

Touring musicians will tell you Seattle has one of the country's finest jazz clubs—Dimitriou's Jazz Alley—and Emerald City players are lucky to have their own showcase in the cozy Belltown boîte called Tula's. But pianist, composer and bandleader Wayne Horvitz, who moved to Seattle from New York in 1988, thought there was something missing. Four years ago he decided to remedy that with The Royal Room.

"I wanted something that felt more like a community place, a place that mostly served local music but was nice enough that people on tour could come through," Horvitz explained.

Known for an eclectic body of work that includes the chamber opera *Joe Hill*, rock and funk groups like Pigpen and Zony Mash, an avant-garde trio with the late Butch Morris and manning the keyboards in John Zorn's Naked City, Horvitz came up in the 1980s as part of New York's "downtown" scene. The Royal Room was partly inspired by the Tin Palace, an East Village club located down the street from CBGB's.

"It was a hang," said the animated, 60-year-old musician. "That's kind of what I had in mind."

The concept has caught on. Over the years, The Royal Room has hosted the likes of Bill Frisell, Bobby Previte, Allison Miller and Nels

Cline, but also served as a "project room," as Horvitz likes to call it, for Seattle-based artists such as violist Eyvind Kang, French horn player Tom Varner, trumpeter Cuong Vu and funky sax man Skerik. On any given night you might hear alt-country, blues, rock, jazz, avant-garde classical music or—on alternate Mondays—Horvitz's Collective Music Ensemble, a "conduction" project inspired by Horvitz's old bandmate Morris.

But the town's best young straightahead improvisers can be found there, too, particularly at the 10 p.m. Monday "Monk Jams," or the club's "Home for the Holidays" series featuring local youngsters shaped by the city's renowned high school jazz band programs.

Ensnconced in the corner of a building owned by a venerable African-American social club, the Royal Room is in Columbia City, a recently gentrified neighborhood full of bars and restaurants about five miles south of downtown. The triangular, 2,500-square-foot spot is actually three venues in one: a performance space with a large stage and a score of four-seater dinner tables; a full-service bar, with extra seating at high counters; and a corner area sometimes curtained off for late-night sessions like the Monk Jam. With revealed brick and wood surfac-

es, antique-looking ceiling lamps and windows to the sidewalk, the Royal Room has a warm, welcoming feel. Many nights there is no cover charge.

Horvitz says running the club is "the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," thanks to the meager margins and precarious economics of a small venue. The Royal Room accommodates 120–150 guests, and a few bad nights can add up quickly. But his partners in the venture, Steve and Tia Freeborn, have extensive business experience, having run Seattle's fabled OK Hotel, where everyone from Nirvana to Charles Gayle used to play. Despite the challenges, Horvitz and the Freeborns have kept the place afloat. They've also earned the loyalty of the community.

"People stop me in elevators downtown and say, 'You're Wayne Horvitz!'" the pianist said with a smile. "I'm always hoping they're going to say how much they like my music, and they say, 'Thank you so much for the Royal Room.' That's one of the things that keeps me going."

It keeps the scene going, too.

"You can fail gracefully there," said Skerik. "I really see it in the lineage of the Knitting Factory and the OK Hotel, a very cool extension of that."

The venue accommodates musicians with a Steinway piano, full drum kit, Hammond B-3 organ, Fender Rhodes, Wurlitzer piano and a Clavinet keyboard.

"I'm not smart enough to solve the problem of a local drummer being able to make a living wage," Horvitz joked, "but if they play here, at least they're not going to have to drag their drums to the car at 2 in the morning."

—Paul de Barros