



BRILLIANT

CORNERS

Jazzwise staggers down memory lane, delves into dark corners, and revisits the shrines that pepper the history of the music. **THIS MONTH // THE NEW APARTMENT LOUNGE, CHICAGO. STORY AND PHOTOS // MICHAEL JACKSON**

The New Apartment Lounge at 504 East 75th street on Chicago's Southside was put on the jazz map by the late, tough tenor legend Von Freeman (1923-2012) who started jam sessions there in 1982. Every Tuesday night Von, backed by bassist 'Big' Matt Ferguson, guitarist Mike Allemana and drummer Michael Raynor, would play a set of ballads and barnstorming blues before handing over to a raft of singers for the 'bewitching hour'. Around 1am, a diverse cluster of instrumentalists would congregate alongside the amoeba shaped bar, awaiting their turn to blow.

The NAL was Allemana's chief weekly gig for 15 years: "The room was special because of so many factors. The old carpet, the low rent way it was kept up. Of course Weezie, the bartender was the first person you would see, which made for colorful experiences. Then there was the clientele: Southside fans, Northside fans, musicians, physicists, economists, prostitutes (Matt's favorite was Sexy Sagittarius); the old, the young, the middle, the doctor, Margaret the cop, Michael J the photographer, (singer) Teddy Bear, all Von's darlings, his 'wife-in-laws', and all the surprise guests that might show up: Roy Hargrove, Ron Blake, Roy Haynes, Pharoah Sanders, Joe Henderson, Steve Coleman."

Freeman's father was one of the first black cops in Chicago, gunned down on the beat, so he knew the perils of the city. In 2002 the street outside the Lounge was renamed Von Freeman Way, but shortly thereafter the sign, plus the pole, were stolen. Vonski's hospitality at the Lounge embraced all comers, not only his 'horses' or hopeful young musicians. One night an aggressive associate, perhaps from Freeman's school days at DuSable High with Gene Ammons, attempted to quash Von and his tenure at the NAL, as Raynor remembers: "he

kept trying to rile Von, saying 'look at this place, what are you doing down here with these white cats, they can't play? No one knows who you are, you ain't shit!' And Von just responded with bemusing encouragement 'that's beautiful baby, beautiful!' Eventually the guy left, dejected he hadn't had more effect."

The blue music bar with mirrored ceiling was adjacent to what Freeman dubbed 'The West Side,' a hotter hued barroom populated by more diligent drinkers. A preposterous fight broke out between two drunk dudes one night, as Allemana recalls: "One guy was tall, the other short. The short guy had taken enough from the tall guy and got in his 1970s Oldsmobile. All of a sudden he started slamming his bumper into the tall guy's brand new Jeep Cherokee. He destroyed it. He hit it at least 15 times. I'm watching this from the inside of the club. Next thing, I see Raynor jump onto a car hood – the short guy drove his vehicle onto the sidewalk trying to hit the tall guy. Later that night I sat with Von at the bar. He had his sunglasses on, was kind of pursing his lips and says to me 'The Ghetto, Michael. It's mean.'

Freeman associates from yesteryear such as Muhal Richard Abrams would stop by; Fred Anderson came to gift Von a new neck-strap shortly before Anderson passed, an indication that neither man intended to forego future practice. The Lounge, owned by Mr Barnes and son Noah, closed for refurbishing in January 2011 and coincident with the loss of Von's steady, his health declined. With its champion's demise last August, the glory days of the New Apartment Lounge are gone, but stalwarts recently revived the Tuesday jam further west on 75th street at the Fifty Yard Line, the site of an earlier Freeman-refereed session, when the joint was known as El Matador.