



The man with jazz in his genes

It's a strange question, but if you've got one night in Bangkok ... 'what DO you do?' The choice of places to spend your time in the most livable city in Asia is mind-boggling; and therein lays the problem.

There is just too much to do in Bangkok. You almost need to go home and lock the door to keep from being entertained.

What do you want?

But what do I really want? I want something fun and unique. I want something I haven't seen before. I want something I don't expect. I want something classy and cool. I want something I'm going to talk about all day the next day.

The indecisive are doomed to a night in a pulsing go-go bar or a hotel lounge with a Filipino cruise ship band. Last week I stumbled upon my number one pick for what to do with 'one night in Bangkok'.

Creep all the way down

Sukhumvit Soi 33 to Black, The Jazz Spot. I suggest you get out of the taxi at the top of the soi and just follow the music.

Black is on the second floor of a shop house style building just past Basilico Italian Restaurant. Manager John Pickard has strategically placed high quality speakers on the roof and cool bebop jazz emanates up the street.

Black opened in mid-January this year. The design of the club is startlingly minimalistic. Literally, the entire club is black with the glowing golden bar near the entrance. Low comfy seating and tables are also black.

Moon-like globes hover above the listening room dimmed to perfection.

The stage is located right in front of the full length storefront window looking out onto the streetscape of Soi 33. All the sound and light in the room are coming from the same direction.

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It has a pleasingly theatrical effect and is why I choose to call this place a 'listening room'.

Don't get me wrong ... it's a full bar with easily the best collection of top shelf vodkas, bourbons and scotches I've seen in Bangkok. The wine list is an eclectic mix of Italian, American, Chilean and New Zealand. For big spenders, they do carry some high end champagnes for special occasions.

The club's owner and band leader Idrees is the real draw at Black. Idrees has been pleasing lucky listeners all over Asia for more than a decade. Originally from Harlem in New York City, he has a jazz pedigree that is hard to match

Trumpet player

Idrees' father is Al Barrymore, aka Talib Dawud, a trumpet player who immigrated to the US from The West Indies. He played with the likes of Louis Armstrong, Benny Carter and Dizzy Gillespie. Idrees's



grandfather was also a trumpeter and his grandmother a singer.

Idrees thrived in the IT business for a while until his jazz genes kicked in. The self-taught horn player settled in Thailand because it was a cheap place to live with a big city to preach the jazz gospel to.

And, after taking to Idrees, that's really what he's all about ... the preservation of the classic American jazz art form. In fact, the club is dedicated to the famous jazz guru Art Blakey.

Art Blakey was the godfather of bebop jazz with his distinctive dominant drumming style. He formed the legendary Jazz Messengers, a group known to mentor dozens of jazz superstars much like The Miles Davis Group of the same era.

Jazz royalty

Blakey played and recorded with jazz royalty like Thelonius Monk, Miles Davis and Charlie Parker. Art Blakey was inducted into the Jazz Hall of Fame in 1982 and the Grammy Hall of Fame in 2001; he is the very definition of a jazz legend.

Idrees's father was a close personal friend of Art Blakey and somehow the connection has been transmitted through his genes. Now Idrees is committed

to establishing a jazz musician incubator right here in Thailand.

After watching his band at Black, I can see his process at work. To date I've seen three Thai piano players; all of them good ... all of them different. His drummers range from a wild young slasher from Cameroon to a cool and collected Thai technician. It isn't a 'band' as much as it is a rotating roster of jazz talent.

What I see mostly is the leadership of Idrees. 'Some of these guys have never had a band leader,' says Idrees. 'Sometimes that's what they need the most to get better.' The young Thai players are responsive and enthusiastic.

When I look around the audience at Black I observe a true melting pot. I see four Japanese guys quietly sipping on whiskey and bobbing their heads to the music. I see a couple of extroverted Scandinavians tapping their toes and shouting out 'yeah ... genius!' I see a group of young Thai ladies testing the wine list and staring in wide-eyed wonder when Idrees puts down his horn and sings a romantic old Nat King Cole tune. Only good music brings together an eclectic crowd like this.

During the band's breaks, new-

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comer to Thailand Maurice Girard from the US takes the stage just to make sure we all wish we'd taken piano lessons as a kid. Maurice got out of the pressure cooker of the restaurant business in California to travel Asia and play music. He's found a home here at Black.

Vintage jazz

When no musicians are on stage vintage jazz acts play on the big flat screen displays hanging from the ceiling. The music never stops at Black, and I think that is the whole point. This club isn't trying to be a sports bar/restaurant/pub/music-as-an-afterthought kind of place.

For Idrees and the staff at Black, The Jazz Spot, it's all about commitment to the appreciation and preservation of a classic American art form.

Idrees and his band play Wednesday thru Sunday and usually start about 8:30pm. If you get there before 8:30 the nominal Bt200 cover charge is waived.

Next time you've got one night in Bangkok, I recommend you head down to Soi 33 to see the man with jazz in his genes.

