

Pennies From Heaven: New Fund Boosts Pay for Local Jazz Musicians

A Bay Area nonprofit has cash for fair wages. Can it convince more venues to play along?



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Jeff Sanford Cartoon Jazz Band at Bird & Beckett Books and Records, 11/10/18. Photo: Jessica Levant.

Even in the best of times, jazz musicians have a hard time scraping by. In San Francisco's current state, with a sky-high cost of living, keeping jazz alive requires creative intervention. You can also call it a subsidy.

One year ago, a group called Jazz in the Neighborhood began a “fair wage” project that does just that — subsidize gigs for working musicians so that they each go home with \$150 in their pocket.

Jazz in the Neighborhood founder and Bay Area trumpet player Mario Guarneri says \$150 is the right threshold in the Bay Area to maintain respectability and quality of an art form that takes a lot of work to develop.



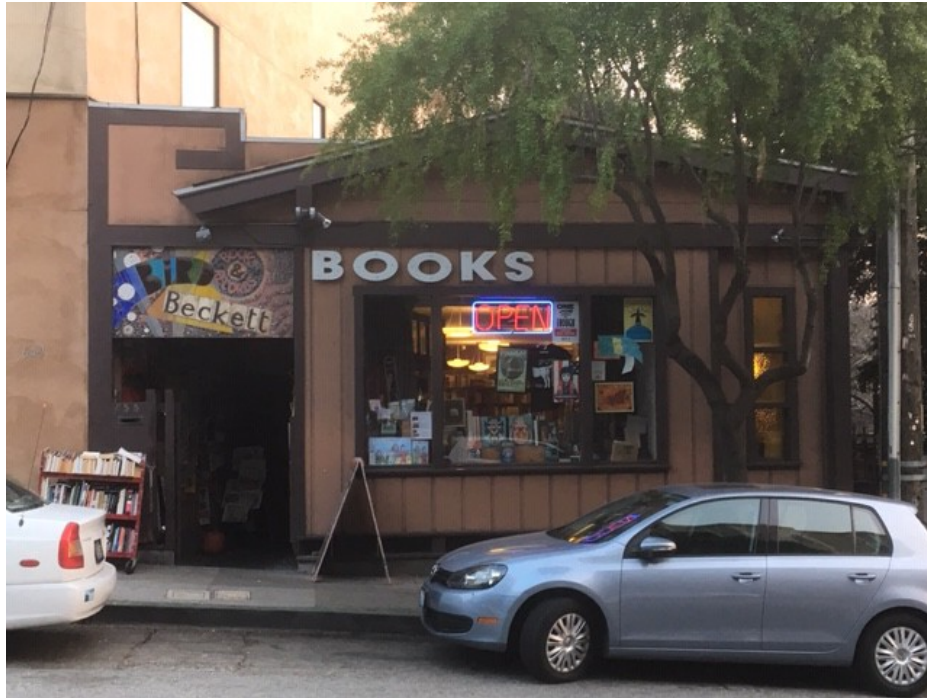
Jazz in the Neighborhood founder Mario Guarneri.

The subsidy requires the participation of local venues. So far, two host regular subsidized gigs: Bird & Beckett Books and Records in San Francisco’s sleepy Glen Park neighborhood, and Marin Country Mart in Larkspur Landing.

Under the Guaranteed Fair Wage Fund program, the venue pays 60% (\$90) of the guaranteed \$150 wage per musician, and Jazz in the Neighborhood puts up 40%, plus an extra 10% for the band’s leader. A few other sites have hosted shows here and there, for 37 subsidized shows in all, but recruiting more regulars has been a challenge. “Believe me, we have talked to other venues. We will keep trying,” Guarneri says.

The first fair wage date was held in November 2017 at Bird & Beckett and featured a trio led by the local pianist Grant Levin. The bookstore

has hosted one or two fair-wage events since then per month, with the lights turned low to help set the mood. It's not a "glitzy place in an entertainment district," proprietor Eric Whittington acknowledged in a recent interview at the shop. "On the surface, it's a bookstore with some folding chairs."



Fair wage venue: Bird & Beckett Books and Records.

The bookstore is an oasis for musicians and music lovers for many reasons, including the caliber and breadth of programming, the quality sound system, and the listening audience. On most nights, hardly anybody makes a peep, a nice contrast to the noisy, raucous environments jazz bands often live in.

At Bird & Beckett, night-of-show donations often don't cover the store's share of the promised fair wage, so Whittington has to dip into the bookstore's nonprofit funds and lean on community fundraising.

"Them Belly Full (But We Hungry)"

It's still early days for the fair wage model. In a year, Jazz in the Neighborhood has paid more than \$10,000 in musician subsidies for the project.

The organization itself is funded through memberships and grants and is in the process of transitioning to a 501(c)(3) nonprofit status. That could help it expand.

Since inception in 2013, Jazz in the Neighborhood has grown into a budget of about \$80,000, which it uses for the fair wage fund, and to put on its own shows and educational programs. Guarneri says it has paid \$250,000 to musicians, including the subsidies, since it began.

Official figures for the average pay of a jazz musician in San Francisco are hard to come by. But Guarneri thinks that outside of private parties and corporate events, \$150 per person is “one of the best gigs in town” — perhaps in the top 10% of what a jazz musician can make.

That’s because many local venues will pay \$100 to \$150 *for an entire band* or offer no base pay at all. Instead, the musicians might get a share of the door charge. Or tips only.



Pianist Grant Levin: First for the fair wage fund.

Pay of \$50 or lower on a given night may mean a struggle to pay for groceries the next day. On top of that, for gigs during dinner hours, breaks and food need to be part of the negotiation, or else musicians may be out of luck and run low on blood sugar.

“It’s like Bob Marley said, ‘A hungry man is an angry man,’” says Levin, paraphrasing one of Marley’s most famous songs.

Guarneri says that “a lot of people don’t even realize what is going on. They walk in, hear music and think ‘Oh, these guys are really good, they are probably making okay money!’”

Doing What You Love

There are many reasons behind the low pay.

A wide range of entertainment options have undercut live music, and—let’s face it—jazz isn’t the often the top choice for young people going out on the town with disposable income. Well-paid unionized hotel gigs downtown, once coveted, have mostly disappeared.

It’s difficult to counterbalance the steady supply of musicians willing to play for next to nothing.

For the gigs that remain, pay is commonly undercut by established working musicians who don’t need the income, by young musicians who will work for free to get established, or by those with day jobs who don’t rely on music for pay.

“Once that precedent is set, once the underbidding has occurred, it’s difficult to counterbalance. We have a steady supply of musicians willing to play for next to nothing,” Levin says.

(I am no stranger to these dynamics. I work by day full-time as a journalist and take gigs at night as a singer. Writing and music are things people love to do; offers for exposure instead of pay are all too common. For me, of the two, music is harder because I love it more and need to be able to hire skilled accompanists, whereas writing is a solo act.)

No Tip Jar

Berkeley-based bassist, composer and band leader Kurt Ribak knows intimately how musicians often must do what’s necessary to make ends

meet. Once he was part of a circus act performing non-jazz music to kids in parks. One circus gig called for him to wear a big tutu. “I am told it was quite a sight to behold,” he says.

Nowadays, however, Ribak performs mostly his own tunes. He has more than 75 original compositions. On Nov. 9 he led a trio at a fair-wage gig at Bird & Beckett. The suggested donation per person was from \$10 to \$20.



Sight to behold: Kurt Ribak.

Ribak appreciates what Jazz in the Neighborhood is trying to do. While \$150 is not a huge amount of money, it is much more along the lines of a living wage. “In San Francisco, it feels like the community aspect is eroding in a lot of areas. To have a place that really is a community is a wonderful thing,” Ribak says of Bird & Beckett.

The next night, the bookstore featured another fair wage act, a group of eight musicians led by horn player Jeff Sanford. The cover charge was \$25.

On both nights, Bird & Beckett offered customers discounts based on income. No one is turned away for lack of funds.

Before the music starts, owner Whittington tells the audience about the fund and Jazz in the Neighborhood, and notes the absence of a tip jar.

Whittington says he tries to educate people that musicians shouldn't have to rely on tips, though there may be resistance to paying for live music, "even in this day of \$1.3 million homes."

"I tell them: 'Look, these people are performing for you. Who's going to pay them? Should they do this for free? Should they do it for nickels? How do you feel about that?'"

Emily Hayes is a jazz/blues/country vocalist and in her spare time is a full-time journalist.