

**Reimagining Jazz Music Presentation:  
From For-Profit Club to Not-For-Profit Society**

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**Abstract**

*Presenting professional jazz in a for-profit club format comes with built-in tensions between artistic and commercial considerations. Using the experience of a recently-formed organization—the Grand River Jazz Society (GRJS)—the suggestion is made that jazz presentation may benefit from a reconceptualized business model, including a volunteer-run society format and not-for-profit status. Further, in an effort to simplify operations, preserve the traditional club format, and separate commercial-artistic interests, a shared-space partnership may also accrue benefits. Such an organizational arrangement was developed with the GRJS and an existing hotel, separating artistic concerns with basic venue logistics and service. This case study provokes theoretical consideration around the mixed-used drivers for arts and culture and their potential for replication in other settings.*

**Key Words:** Not-for-profit, volunteers, jazz, presentation, society

## Introduction

Despite a defining status of ‘national treasure’ in the United States’ musical heritage (Sehgal, 2008), as well as being considered America’s original ‘classical music’ (Sales, 1984), jazz maintains a problematic presence in contemporary society, particularly when it comes to live presentation (Farley, 2008). Recent NEA data suggested attendance at live jazz performances slipped as much as 30% in recent years, and the anecdotal incidence of jazz clubs folding has become more commonplace (Smith, 2013; Teachout, 2009). Nevertheless, other good news from the jazz world seems to counter these trends, including record numbers of students seeking jazz studies (Chinen, 2007), as well as the enduring popularity and growth of jazz festivals (Fraumeni, 2012).

Part of the challenge for jazz presentation can be attributed to the evolution from mainstream popular dance music during the 1940s and 1950s, to a more sophisticated art form, typically attributed to the onset of bebop and other more complex styles. Contributing to the shift in popularity, the rise of rock n’ roll arguably further distanced jazz from the mainstream, pushing it more towards the periphery as a ‘serious music’ (Lopes, 2002), often finding its most natural resting place amongst high-brow society (Peterson & Simkus, 1992).

Along the way, jazz assimilated various traditions including fusion, ethnic, smooth, funk, rock, and blues expanding the tent, but also elevating the ambiguity around how jazz is defined. Further complicating the story, the question of where jazz should be played became less clear, with choices ranging from the original dance-halls, to clubs, restaurants, large concert venues, and outdoor amphitheaters. Meanwhile, the steady rise in sophistication of the art form was fueled and reinforced by an increasingly-developed training and academic effort, which while still growing, has suffered from internal conflict around appropriate pedagogy and direction—

whether it be emphasizing the historical ‘canon’ or paving the way for new expressions (Williams, 2012).

Finally, there is the question of money—artist compensation, and how to best fund the art form. With the level of training commonly found amongst today’s jazz musicians (often with at least a bachelor’s university degree in music), preparation is on par with most professional classical music performers where non-profit arts organizations are the norm (i.e., symphony orchestras, chamber music ensembles), and performance fees follow some kind of established pay scale. In contrast, jazz is predominantly performed in for-profit settings such as bars and clubs with little structural support for adequate compensation. One survey found as much as 90% of jazz organization working within the for-profit private sector, with the other portion being mostly made up of universities and larger not-for-profit institutions such as Lincoln Center for the Arts (DiMaggio, 2006). This finding is reinforced by the annual *Downbeat* Jazz Venue Guide (2013), where only a small handful is identified as not-for-profit venues (out of 150 listed). In this predominant context, proprietors inevitably face a perpetual tension in the often-conflicting choice between commercial and artistic considerations. As such, in addition to the identity and definitional challenges associated with the art form, there are considerable challenges with respect to the organization, funding, and payment of live jazz performances.

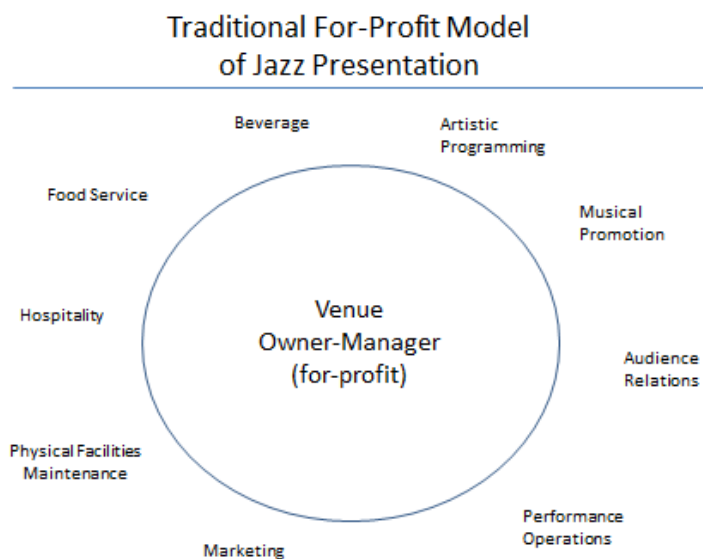
The purpose of this paper is to examine the current practices, or what might be referred to as the ‘traditional model’ of jazz presentation in the for-profit world, and consider its problems and limitations. This will be followed by a description of an actual case study which challenges the traditional format for presentation. From this emerges an ‘alternative model’ drawing from the not-for-profit tradition and rooted squarely in the community through volunteer involvement and blended enterprise. In short, the paper suggests the option of transforming the jazz

presentation format from for-profit club, to not-for-profit society in order to address the most pernicious problems associated with the currently-predominant formats.

### **Traditional Model of Jazz Presentation**

The traditional approach to jazz music presentation typically takes the form of a for-profit jazz club (Jazz Venue Guide, 2013). This is an establishment that both presents live music, often on an elevated, lit and amplified stage, usually with an entry fee. A common component includes serving food and beverage, often with purchase minimums, as an important component of its revenue model. As proprietor for this kind of establishment, the responsibilities are numerous, including the activities associated with maintaining a hospitality enterprise—food & beverage handling, hosting customers, building maintenance, security, and insurance, etc. In addition, come the activities associated with being a venue operator including programming, promotion, marketing, audience relations, outreach, artist relations, operations, etc. (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Not only do these activities represent a substantial load of disparate efforts to juggle simultaneously, they also create divergent pulls with respect to purposes and priorities. For example, does the owner/manager view the music as an entertainment attraction in order to maximize food and beverage sales, and overall revenues? Or, does the proprietor emphasize the inherent artistic value of the musical offering as paramount, encouraging food and beverage sales as both an enhancement to the overall experience, as well as a means of supporting the musical offering? These represent very different views that strike to the core of what is being presented and why, ultimately playing a major role in the overall music presentation experience (Becker 2004). This kind of confusion around purpose, values, and overall motivations is inevitable under these conditions, requiring analysis and reflection.

In addition to emphasis, attention and resources, these tensions also translate to specific choices for financial revenue and expense. A typical managerial mindset for achieving profitability will encourage cost savings at every turn—including maintaining proper inventory, wait staff compensation, hospitality enhancements, and of course, artist fees. Despite potentially good intentions of the proprietor, such calculus can unfortunately result in the musical talent being paid the least amount possible. With the education system continually producing an abundant surplus of highly skilled musicians desiring to play, combined with downward pressure on what audiences are willing to pay, the result can be an overall system spiraling downward towards unreasonably low artist fees.

Endemic to this situation are the overall effects of the Baumol's 'cost disease' known to afflict the performing arts broadly (Towse, 1997). This theory suggests that, unlike most of the private sector, the cost of mounting musical performances does not gain efficiencies over time (e.g., a Beethoven string quartet will always require the labor of four musicians for a fixed

amount of performance time). This leads to proportionally-reduced compensation earning power for musicians over time relative to the rest of the economy. Under these conditions, combined with the pressures to perform within a profit-driven context, the inevitable result leads towards a steadily deteriorating financial position for live jazz performance.

Without a strong signal of purpose and priorities, audiences can also be confused in a jazz performance context. In a club setting, with drinks and conviviality, there tends to be a continual challenge of talking versus listening audience (Becker, 2004). Should the room go silent once the performance starts? Does the music occupy the center of attention, or provide ambiance for a lively night out? These are persistent questions that jazz presenters cannot seem to escape—all within the context created by the tension between jazz art and entertainment (Stein, 2012).

### **Case Study: The Grand River Jazz Society**

In contrast to the prevailing model of for-profit clubs (DiMaggio 2006), the Grand River Jazz Society (GRJS) serves as an example of an alternative framework for jazz. Formed in 2011, and located in a Canadian municipality of roughly 500,000, the GRJS started presenting professional-level jazz music on weekends, with 80 shows per year in a 10-month season (September-June). The venue is a shared-space partnership with a local hotel, including food and beverage service and a formal stage with professional lighting, sound and grand piano. Over the first three years, audiences averaged 80+ per night, paying a cover charge between \$12 and \$20—with the overall attendance tally for the first two years hitting over 2000 during 240+ shows. Similar patterns are emerging through year four. The GRJS was established as an incorporated not-for-profit with an artistic purpose and maintains an active working board for its leadership.

It's worth noting that the Canadian and American contexts differ, primarily with respect to funding sources. Comparative studies indicate the Canadian government to be more active in supporting the arts through such vehicles as grants and subsidies, though the American tradition of corporate and foundation support is higher than other countries (Martorella, 1996). As such, mission-driven arts supporting institutions exist in both the US and Canada, albeit in varying support formats (e.g., government versus foundation).

Several elements differentiate GRJS operations from the predominant majority of jazz clubs including: not-for-profit mission, shared-space arrangement, volunteer-driven, and diverse funding model.

**a) Not-for-Profit Mission**

With the slogan “*building community through excellence in jazz*”, a steady stream of local and visiting professional musicians have provided high-quality performances, along with other support activities (e.g., clinics). This not-for-profit status sends a clear message around the artistic purposes of the society which are music-centered, while also encouraging the social context. Signs discouraging loud talking, and messages at the beginning of sets, help emphasize a culture which is engaged with the performance onstage. A key component to jazz performance is improvisation, and the applause acknowledgement of individual solos serves as a lively interaction between band and audience.

**b) Shared-Space**

While many performance formats exist, jazz has traditionally flourished in a night-club setting (Berliner 2009)—posing both opportunities and challenges. The central problem is in maintaining a commitment to artistic integrity while also enabling a relaxed, lively, and engaging performance setting, all within a profitable hospitality business. Initiating an effort akin to



‘mixed industry’ efforts found in many festivals (Andersson & Getz, 2009) and some museums (Gurian, 2001), the GRJS struck a partnership with a local hotel owner to dedicate a performance space to jazz presentation on weekends. The hotel provides the venue space (with seating for 130) without charge to the society, in exchange for revenues they receive from food and beverage service. This mixed-use operation provides many advantages to the GRJS including being able to purely focus on the artistic mission (hiring talent and paying for their services from a diverse revenue base), and not having to be concerned with such issues as building maintenance, security, food/beverage service, cleaning, wait staff, etc.

**c) Volunteer-Driven**

With a clearly-articulated social mission, numerous individuals from the community eagerly stepped forward to build and maintain the GRJS. Donated services included website, logo, graphic design, audio-technical, accounting, legal, and many others. An early ethic was established to keep the GRJS as a volunteer-run operation, keeping the business model very lean and enabling substantial community involvement as well as a feeling of grass-roots ownership. With this, revenue sources for the society are wholly dedicated to artist fees (including an honorarium for the artistic director) and technical support, motivating community good-will to carry the effort forward (Hsieh, 2010).

The long-term viability of a volunteer-run society—without paid staff—is an issue that each organization would have to address. Such groups rely on the dedicated leadership of those willing to dedicate their free time and energy into both governance (i.e., board of directors) and management. In some cases a paid administrator might make sense, though the obvious drawback is the increased level of fund-raising required to support their compensation levels.

Further, once an organizations starts to bring on paid staff, they can erode the overall motivating ethic that “we are all pitching in to make this happen.”

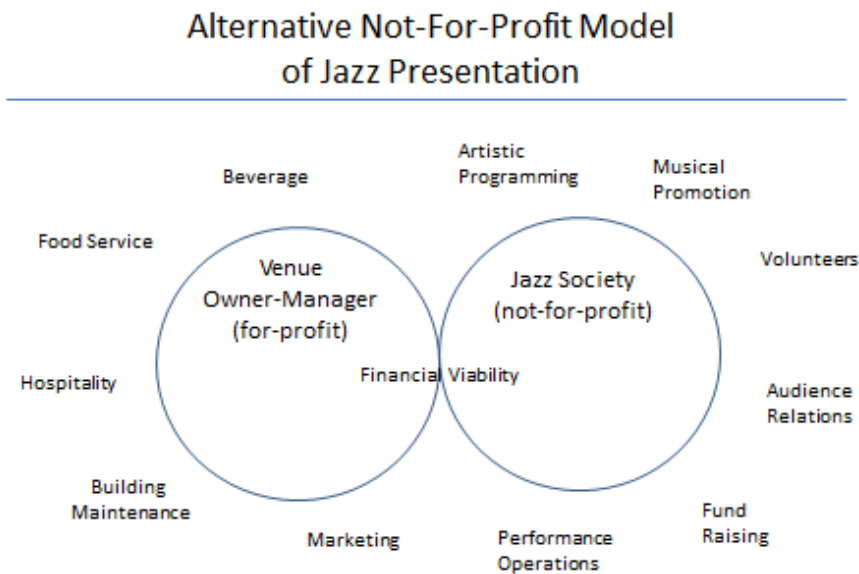
**d) Diverse Funding Model**

Finally, as a not-for-profit society, the GRJS is able to raise funds from a variety of sources. To date, government/foundations, corporate sponsorships, and individual support (by way of annual pass membership), have each contributed roughly 15% each, with the other 55% being covered by earned ticket revenue. This diverse funding base, not only gives the GRJS flexibility to draw from a variety of sources, hedging against declines from any one source, it also allows for potential growth in any direction depending on need and effort. Not-for-profit status provides a mission-based organizational frame, though the added element of volunteer-driven ethic (revenue directed exclusively to artists and technical workers) extends the sense of purpose and legitimacy.

**An Alternative Model for Jazz Presentation**

An alternative model for jazz presentation (see Figure 2) attempts to address the challenges outlined in the Traditional model (Figure 1). Separating the Owner-Manager role (which focuses on the business and logistics of running a food & beverage service) with the Jazz Society role (which focuses on finding, promoting, and presenting musical talent), enables specialization of responsibilities. It requires full focus and effort to provide a proper food and beverage establishment, including managing proper alcohol service, culinary preparation, security, maintenance, cleanliness, and hospitality.

Figure 2



The underlying assumptions behind this separated format suggests that jazz music presentation benefits from substantial understanding of the art form (and the existing variations between art and entertainment), sensitive interaction with audience members, judgment in programming & promotion, volunteer leadership, as well as dedicated attention to technical considerations including sound, lighting, staging and instruments. Entire areas of effort are required to garner resources to properly support artistic ventures. Government and Foundation grants require adherence to bureaucratic requirements (e.g., forms, filings, reports) and a commitment to meeting social, artistic and community mandates. Corporate sponsors, while interested in satisfying social responsibility, are also interested in areas such as reputational advantages, hospitality benefits (customer, suppliers, employees), and in some cases direct marketing effects (O'Hagan & Harvey, 2000).

Separating these two areas helps to remove the potential for conflict in priorities, each dedicating efforts and interests in their own particular domain focus. What connects the two sides, is a common purpose in attracting and retaining adequate audience to sustain their various interests. The Jazz Society needs paying audience members to cover their costs and sustain the operation. The Owner-Manager seeks to make an adequate profit. In combination, as a blended offering, the results can be robust as each seeks their individual interests within the same collaborative space—or what can be labeled ‘financial viability’.

While the diagram suggests a clear distinction between the venue and the society, certain activities will likely overlap, the most likely example being with the marketing function. Since both parties benefit with additional guests being attracted to performances, both are motivated to promote and market their joint activities. This has been the case with the GRJS, where the Hotel encourages its restaurant guests (located in other parts of the building) to attend music shows in the jazz club section. Similar promotions exist with the website. On the other side, jazz society events naturally draw attention to the overall offerings at the hotel.

### **Discussion and Theoretical Considerations**

Recognizing the limitations of a single case study example, the GRJS provokes theoretical consideration. The success of this organization leads to the question of whether this kind of society could be replicated elsewhere with positive benefits for the jazz arts. Numerous other jazz societies exist with the intent of supporting the art form, but very few with the intent of programming within a dedicated club venue setting. Admittedly, numerous unique factors exist in conjunction with the specifics around the GRJS, including venue, key personnel, and funding sources. While these factors will presumably not be directly replicated, it is argued that similarly-positive resources exist in other communities, and that they can contribute to uniquely

heterogeneous organizations within a broader, over-arching frame for success. The key concepts and organizing elements will remain the same, while the specific application will be unique to those who grow it in their own backyard.

This also raises the question of whether the format could be functional in a multiple venue formation, possibly within an adjacent geography (e.g., cities within a region). Arguably, moving to multiple venues increases the complexity, logistical demands, and administration demands. Similarly, unique characteristics from one location to the next would likely favor important adaptations to local conditions (e.g., the support of an enthusiastic corporate sponsor, or being embedded within a university town), the nuances of which might be less effective in a multiple-venue format. Potentially, a more fruitful option would be to create a coordinating network amongst jazz presenters, particularly for such things as collaborating with touring groups, but also for moral support and the ability to share best practices.

The idea of balancing mixed industry players—not-for-profit, government, for-profit, and community—also opens discussion around new modes of consideration for viable cultural presentation beyond this art form (Andersson & Getz 2009). Within the rubric of mixed use industries come the potential to address the problems of ‘cost disease’ in the arts (Caves 2000), community engagement for artistic causes (Hseih 2010), and effective urban planning with the challenge of revitalizing cities (Markhusen & Gadwa 2010).

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