



Abe Beeson

By Todd Matthews  
Photos by Avron Locky

# Jazz Lives Here

Twenty years ago, the manager of a small Midwest radio station arrived in Tacoma for a weeklong broadcast industry conference. He picked up his rental car downtown and turned on the radio, and 88.5 KPLU FM was the first station he landed on. The visitor was familiar with the station's reputation for playing straight-ahead jazz — and it was music he loved: the cool tones of Miles Davis; the catchy, up-tempo stylings of Dave Brubeck; the gospel-like wail of Jimmy Smith on the Hammond B-3 and the throaty honk of John Coltrane. Still, what he heard being broadcast from the basement of an old red-brick building on the leafy campus of Pacific Lutheran University far exceeded his expectations.

That night, he phoned his wife. "Hey, honey, guess what I found?" he asked. "A great jazz station."

What Paul Stankavich heard twenty years ago stuck with him as he moved from radio station to radio station: in Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Washington State (Bellingham, in fact, where he tuned in to KPLU through a "translator") and Alaska. "I just loved what I heard," he says.

In April Stankavich was hired as KPLU's new general manager. He oversees day-to-day operations of the station's jazz and news programs. He's also leading a \$5 million capital campaign to move the station out of its cramped, run-down offices and into a new twelve-thousand-square-foot glass and steel broadcast center. So far, \$4.1 million has been raised; if you tune in, you'll surely hear a pitch for donations.

*While  
broadcasters  
across the nation  
surrender to the  
tyranny of smooth jazz, a  
storied South Sound radio  
station is still upbeat and swinging.*

## Stay Cool



Here's the short-form "Who, Where and How Can I Play" on jazz in Tacoma. Maybe the most active of local players is saxophonist and educator Kareem Kandi ([www.myspace.com/kareemkandi](http://www.myspace.com/kareemkandi)), a University Place resident. His band regularly includes a couple of other locals: guitarist Mason Hargrove and bassist Osama Afifi. Trumpeter Lance Buller ([www.lancebuller.com](http://www.lancebuller.com)), who worked in big bands in Hollywood and Las Vegas, often appears with vocalist Stephanie Porter, a former Tacoman. Rich Wetzels leads the Groovin' Higher Jazz Orchestra ([www.myspace.com/groovinhigher](http://www.myspace.com/groovinhigher)). And look for South Sound saxophonist and educator Tracy Knoop, who played lead alto with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra.



Where in town to hear live jazz? No place has yet filled the vacuum left by Red Kelly's, which closed in 2004; Jazzbones (2803 Sixth Ave., 253.396.9169), Engine House #9 (611 N. Pine St., 253.272.3435) and Mandolin Cafe (3923 S. 12th St., 253.761.3482) all regularly program jazz. And if you want to get in the game yourself, consider the jazz programs at Pacific Lutheran University ([www.plu.edu/~music](http://www.plu.edu/~music)), University of Puget Sound ([www.ups.edu](http://www.ups.edu)) and Pierce College ([www.pierce.ctc.edu/music](http://www.pierce.ctc.edu/music)). Young players can get a head start at Tacoma School of the Arts ([www.tacoma.k12.wa.us/schools/hs/sota](http://www.tacoma.k12.wa.us/schools/hs/sota)) or Stadium High School ([www.tacoma.k12.wa.us](http://www.tacoma.k12.wa.us) for both). — T.M.

Created in 1966 as a classical radio station on the PLU campus in suburban Parkland, KPLU has grown into a major jazz radio institution. It ranks thirteenth out of nearly eight hundred stations in the National Public Radio (NPR) network nationwide and reaches 356,000 listeners, according to the most recent statistics released by

Here are a few of the reasons. An aggressive program to purchase translators (nine are now operating) enables the station to be heard most anywhere in the Puget Sound — even in Victoria, B.C.; the station has rapidly grown its online presence through twenty-four-hour, all-jazz streams that have expanded its reach worldwide, particularly in Europe,

China and Japan, where jazz is even more popular

than in the United States; and management has hired on-air talent with a deep knowledge of jazz and its history.

Serendipity has played a role, too: KPLU happens to operate in a market where its listeners are well educated and inclined to support both the arts and NPR.

Its secret weapon is this: the station is nearly obsessive about listening to its audience. Its bible is a collection of listener polls dating back twenty years that consistently tell staff the same story: play the standards, the familiar tunes, the songs people know.

"When I started, it was pretty much a free-for-all," explains program director Joey Cohn, who has worked at the station twenty years. "Basically, whoever was on the air programmed the station the way they thought it should be programmed. We had no listener input. Today, the station is more listener-focused than ever before."

Music that's programmed for the KPLU airwaves is selected from a library of more than ten thousand LPs and CDs that reaches floor-to-ceiling in one large office and spills down a hallway lined with framed broadcasting awards, into the broadcast studio.

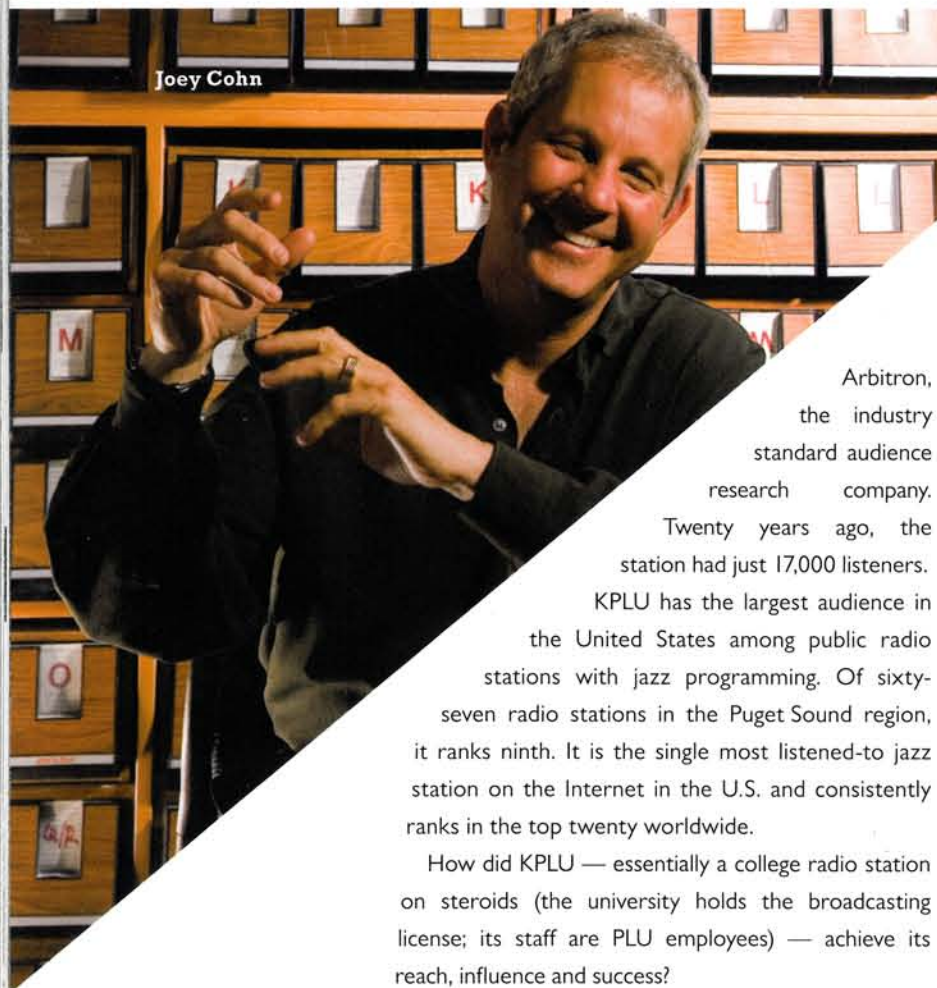
Contents of the recordings have been compiled in a computerized database from which music director Nick Francis creates set lists for the station's three staple shows: "Midday Jazz" (9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.), "Evening Jazz" (7:30 p.m. to midnight) and "Jazz on the Grooveyard" (midnight to 3:00 a.m.). Program hosts have license to rearrange, delete or add songs based on calls and e-mails from listeners.

"I do think it's because of the type of jazz we play," says popular "Evening Jazz" host Abe Beeson, explaining KPLU's success. It's a Tuesday evening, and the opening notes of a track by pianist Robert Glasper trickle over the airwaves — the first tune of the night. Beeson, dressed in black cord jeans, a black polo shirt and white sneakers and sporting silver earrings in each lobe, looks more like the host of an alternative rock show — which he is, part-time, at KEXP-FM in Seattle — than of a jazz program. But the boyish-looking and -sounding Beeson has worked behind the microphone at KPLU since 1989 (he's now thirty-seven) and has been full-time host of "Evening Jazz" since 1998. "We don't play a lot of avant-garde stuff that alienates people. We're playing the really good jazz that people like. And, thankfully, jazz goes back a hundred years, so we can put a lot of hits in there. It doesn't get old."

A show like "Evening Jazz," which features lots of ballads, could quickly turn syrupy and mawkish. "I will play songs for people," Beeson acknowledges. "But I don't do dedications. I will not come on the air like Delilah [the syndicated radio DJ who takes requests and plays love songs] and say, 'This is going out to Joe. Joe's

girlfriend, Susie, has got the rose petals on the bed. So hurry home, Joe.' Nothing like that."

Though it enjoys an enviable reputation throughout the Pacific Northwest and beyond, one of KPLU's biggest challenges is to retain a local connection. In Tacoma, where Red Kelly's, the city's last jazz-only nightclub, closed in 2003, it's harder to find South Sound talent that fits the mold of what KPLU



Joey Cohn

Arbitron, the industry standard audience research company.

Twenty years ago, the station had just 17,000 listeners. KPLU has the largest audience in the United States among public radio stations with jazz programming. Of sixty-seven radio stations in the Puget Sound region, it ranks ninth. It is the single most listened-to jazz station on the Internet in the U.S. and consistently ranks in the top twenty worldwide.

How did KPLU — essentially a college radio station on steroids (the university holds the broadcasting license; its staff are PLU employees) — achieve its reach, influence and success?



Nick Francis

listeners expect. "Usually, there are two or three local artists who are going to come up on the night's play list," says Beeson. He had to think some to come up with South Sound jazz musicians the station plays, but finally listed trumpeter Lance Buller,

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## JAZZ LIVES HERE

*continued from page 17* Gypsy jazz quartet Pearl Django and vocalist Stephanie Porter.

Still, the station makes a serious effort to support local jazz. "Jazz NW," a weekly radio show (Sunday, 1:00 p.m.) hosted by Jim Wilke, focuses on regional jazz from Portland to Vancouver. For the last two years, KPLU has sponsored the Tacoma Jazz Festival and provided emcees. KPLU is also among the co-sponsors of "Jazz Under the Stars," a free outdoor concert series at PLU that draws Pacific Northwest musicians and South Sound fans.

The station's annual "Christmas Jam" is an admission-free concert on the PLU campus featuring the University Jazz Ensemble comprised of PLU students performing with a guest vocalist of national renown such as Jane Monheit. The concert is broadcast live on KPLU. And in support of music education in Puget Sound schools, KPLU developed a mentoring program involving bands from ten high schools and one middle school and the participation of eleven local jazz professionals. The KPLU "School of Jazz" program has produced three CDs of performances by bands in the program.

"They are doing a lot lately to support the local jazz scene," confirms Tacoma trumpeter and big band leader Rich Wetzel, who points to the station's sponsorship of events and its comprehensive online calendar for any local musician to list upcoming gigs.

Maintaining a local connection while building its profile nationally and worldwide is a kind of balancing act. But growing a jazz radio station in any direction is bucking the trend that's seen the number of jazz stations across the U.S. dwindle dramatically. Many have gone to a "smooth jazz" format (read: easy-listening), while some stations have abandoned jazz altogether. Even other jazz stations in the NPR network are tending to ramp up news programming and pare down the hours of music they broadcast. KPLU is one of only a few NPR stations that still play over one hundred hours of jazz each week.

"We've been very diligent in keeping in touch with our listeners and trying to program a jazz station that resonates with the kind of jazz they enjoy," explains Cohen. "And, frankly, inside the station we love jazz. The people that work here, the management of the station, are all committed to the music. We've always had that at KPLU. That's what we're here for: to play great jazz for our listeners." **CA**

## GROWING PANES

*continued from page 22* Jane Russell was a very important person in the work that followed. Unfortunately, she died before the museum opened, but she had a keen interest in both its development and its future. She was usually a listener in our lively discussions and arguments; when we reached a critical point in our deliberations, however, she would quietly intervene with a comment or an idea that got us back in focus and on track. George Russell, with a different style of leadership, was the dynamo who propelled us forward at an astonishing pace. He was also remarkably important in securing the funds for the project.

We were extraordinarily fortunate in the other initial members of the board. Kelso Gillenwater, the publisher of the Tacoma News Tribune, was an incredibly articulate man driven by a powerful vision for the future of the city. Bill Philip, an unusually successful banker in Tacoma, was a long-time leader in the city who knew exactly how to make things happen. Anne Gould Hauberg, who with John Hauberg and Dale had founded the Pilchuck School, knew the world of art and especially artists working in glass.

Non-trustees also played crucial roles in the project. In many communities government is a problem, creating a series of hurdles that must be overcome before action is possible. This was not the case in Tacoma. Ray Corpuz, then the city manager, and Craig Sively, of the Public Works Department, were extraordinarily helpful as we made our way through the maze of permits and the details of construction. They are truly the unsung heroes of the venture.

Arthur Erickson, an architect who gently articulates very strongly held convictions, came up with a series of remarkable concepts for us. I grew up in the Northwest and remember vividly the sawdust burners that dotted the Northwest landscape and especially the tide flats of Tacoma in the first half of the twentieth century. Arthur used that history to link the new museum to Tacoma's past with the dramatic cone for the hot shop. With a single stroke he created an icon for the museum and for the city.

We had amazing good luck at another crucial moment when we hired Josi Callan as director of the museum-to-be. In Josi we found not only someone with extraordinary experience in running a museum, but also a director with flair, style, taste and personality. She not only oversaw the construction, built an organization and engaged a remarkably talented staff; she also organized the stunning initial exhibitions at the new facility. Finally, she orchestrated a launching of the museum that created worldwide publicity.

## Pane IV: What I Have Learned

One of the most exciting things about the museum is the range of ages that you see among the visitors and the diversity of ethnic and racial backgrounds in the hot shop audience, playing at artist in the education studio and studying the exhibits.

I was struck by this one Saturday in the hot shop. There was the usual mix of ages in the audience. At one point, the emcee asked: "How many of you have been to this museum before?" All kinds of little hands went up; very few adult hands were in evidence. The children had obviously been to the museum on school tours, and now they were returning with their parents in tow. I think it is wonderful to have children leading their parents to a museum!

When I retired from UPS, I decided I was going to lead a different kind of life, move on to something totally different. I had no idea that it would take me into the world of art. I had always been interested in art, but I had no formal training in the field. I simply enjoyed art; it brought a richness into my life. The interest in glass as an art form I attribute to Dale Chihuly. I was intrigued by his work and amazed by the beauty he created.

I can go to the museum and sit in the hot shop day after day and never be bored. There is always something new, something different to observe and study. The museum has enriched my life enormously. Through it, I have encountered a constant flow of artists engaged in a seemingly never-ending variety of techniques for working in glass, and I have seen remarkable art that I never knew existed.

When I returned to Tacoma from the East Coast in 1973, I was shocked by the contrast between the collections of art available in Boston, New York and Washington, D.C., and those here in the Northwest. It seemed unfair. It affected seriously the educational opportunities for young people — my great concern in life. If a child is exposed only to reproductions of art, there is an impact but it is limited. To see, subsequently, the original work is a shock, a profound shock, because the impact is so much more powerful.

Fortunately, the contrast between East and West is diminishing with the major expansion of the Seattle Art Museum, the opening of the grand new facility of the Tacoma Art Museum which enables it to present remarkably different shows and the wonderfully enhanced exposure to the work of artists working in glass at the Museum of Glass. Now, our challenge is to continue boldly the growth and expansion of our museums which enrich us all and especially our children. **CA**