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Speakeasy-style jazz club is back in town

By **MATTHEW WILSON**

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A SPEAKEASY-style jazz club is returning to Henley early next month after almost five years in limbo — with the location of the town centre venue being kept discreetly under wraps for now.

The Backhouse Club is the brainchild of long-time jazz enthusiast Michael Warner, who many readers will recognise as the organiser of July's 50th anniversary celebration of the moon landings in Market Place.

Since moving to Henley in 2000, the 55-year-old father-of-two has used his time outside work to volunteer as a scout leader and as the head coach of the Tri Henley triathlon club.

But with his children now nearing university age, Michael, who lives in Queen Street, has enough spare time to devote to one of his other consuming passions: jazz.

While many people would be content merely to fire up their hi-fi, Michael was keen to revive the club he first launched in Henley eight years ago.

As he tells it, the inspiration for the Backhouse Club dates back to his bachelor days in London.

"For 10 years, in my mid-twenties to early thirties, I lived in Brixton," he says. "One day, I was asked by a not entirely trustworthy friend to cough up some dough and become a member of a private jazz club.

"I had just seen the film *Round Midnight* and a wonderful documentary on Art Kane's famous 1958 photograph 'A Great Day in Harlem', where the jazz masters of the day gathered together for a single photo — Count Basie, Art Blakey, Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Thelonius Monk and Lester Young among others.

"So I took the risk and sent a cheque out into the ether — long before the days of bank transfers and PayPal — never expecting to hear a thing about it again.

"Then one day a letter arrived through the door — an actual letter on paper, no email in those days — describing where the next jazz event was to be held. These letters kept coming, one every two months."

Michael recalls that the letters written by the club's organiser were "artful and witty", with the date, time and venue of the next event tucked away at the end, almost as an afterthought.

"He built an aura around the club, and you weren't let down — he delivered, as advertised. I mean, the way I remember it, at one of the venues you had to go between two massive bins in the dark behind a warehouse to where there was a sort of a grubby tradesman's entrance.

"You pressed the bell to summon the lift to the fourth floor, and as it went up you could just begin to hear the jazz music, and then it opened — just like a sort of speakeasy — and there was the yellow light like you might see in Ronnie Scott's in Soho.

"It was like walking into Ronnie Scott's but in a smaller version, and you could hear the clinking of the beer bottles and sotto voices in deference to the music, this wonderful music that was being played, and smoke swirling — so we can't really recreate that bit, but that whole slightly mystical, magical-type environment for a jazz club, that's what I was trying to recreate with the Backhouse Club."

Did the formative experience of squeezing between the bins at the back of a warehouse prompt the "Backhouse" name?

"That event was part of the inspiration," laughs Michael. "But



Keyed up: Michael Warner founded the Backhouse Club in 2011. It returns to Henley on Thursday, December 5

mainly it's a play on two ideas — 'Bacchus' the Roman god of wine, while 'Backhouse Club' conjures up the idea of a speakeasy during American Prohibition, when hidden back rooms of hotels and non-alcoholic bars put on music and served alcohol in secret."

With what Michael calls the "first edition" of the Backhouse Club having run from 2011 to 2015, the second edition will commence operations on Thursday, December 5, from 8pm to 10pm.

Catering for lovers of bebop, blue note and contemporary jazz, the club will meet at the same time on the first Thursday of each month.

Emails have gone out to the club's previous subscribers, but the passage of time means Michael is looking to attract a new generation of jazz aficionados.

To get things off to a flying start, he has booked the Kit Massey Trio, made up of Jon Shenoy on sax, Tom Farmer on bass and Kit Massey on keys.

"The club is going to stay focused on the London musicians with whom I have a connection," says Michael. "The selling point is, I can bring to Henley at a very affordable price the best jazz musicians in London, plugged into the most up to date scene. It's pretty special to have that type of relationship."

With a capacity of 50, the aim is to create an appreciative and

suitably intimate environment for the audience and performers alike.

"I'm quite against this sort of talking over jazz in clubs and bars and things," adds Michael. "Where the musicians have spent, you know, probably a decade or more honing their craft and everyone's chatting over it as background music.

"I just can't buy that, so I wanted to bring back the deference to the music and the musicians and the stories behind the music.

"We always ask the musicians to explain the piece that's about to be played, where they come from, what should we listen out for? And I love that because that means everyone is then focused on listening, watching the event.

"The idea is to focus, but you can't hang on to that for an hour and a half, so that's why we have three sets of 20 minutes, with 20 minutes in between, and in between sets you can chat and go and get your drinks and what have you.

"During the third set, I do like to let the musicians play their own compositions, but it will still be in the theme of bebop."

Admission to the club will be £20, by pre-paid tickets only.

"It's not pay at the door, not yet," says Michael. "It may be later on, but at the moment it's essentially a private party where you contribute to the cost of the music. Unless I

convert this into a formal business as a limited company, I can't charge at the door."

As for where that door is located, Michael explains that for now he is seeking to stay true to his original speakeasy-style inspiration for the Backhouse Club.

"I want to maintain a small aura of mystique around the club, and to do that one thing I can do is not publicise the venue. So I didn't mention it on the flyer — it's not on there. It says if you want to know where it is you go to the website.

"But I don't want to tell anyone that because I'm trying to create a little bit of a filter for people. That's why it says 'at an exclusive venue'. I do realise that before long everyone will know where it is. That's fine. It may be a foolish thing to do, but it just feels like a little bit of fun."

Another reason to visit the club's website is that in order to give newcomers a flavour of the kind of music that will be played, Michael has posted a series of videos by Miles Davis, John Coltrane, and a number of the jazz legends who featured in Art Kane's historic photoshoot for *Esquire* magazine.

Above all, jazz is about having the freedom to experiment — and the Backhouse Club is no exception.

"Future sessions may be slightly different," says Michael. "I mean, in the past we've had some stunning blues guitarists and harmonica, and that was one of the most stunning sessions we had. So we might have some blues, some gypsy jazz. I'm not averse to having a singer. So it might vary in the same way it did before, but I will try to keep a core theme of this bebop-type improvised jazz."

He pauses. "I'm trying to avoid it being stuffy. I'm not an expert in jazz but — it's a bit like art — I know what I like. If you click on the videos on the website then you'll know what I like and you'll know what the club is built around — it's built around those cool standards that were made famous by those jazz musicians."

• For more information and to purchase tickets, email mwarn@thebackhouseclub.co.uk or visit www.thebackhouseclub.co.uk

Opera's rising stars are in festive mood

AN evening of opera with some of the UK's brightest rising stars is in store at the Kenton Theatre next month, writes Peter Anderson.

Opera Prelude, a Henley-based charity dedicated to supporting the next generation of operatic talent, is inviting music lovers to mark the start of the festive season with a gala event on Thursday, December 5.

"Cantique de Noel" will showcase the talents of six singers hailing from London, Russia, China and Henley, accompanied by pianist Natalie Burch.

A spokesman for Opera Prelude said: "Looking at the programme, what a treat is in store. There are performances of songs from some of the best loved opera and musical theatre — *Così fan tutte*, *La Bohème* and *Carmen*, as well as *South Pacific* and *My Fair Lady*. And, perfect for this time of year, *Cantique de Noel* itself, aka *O Holy Night*. Expect a warm and uplifting evening introduced by the artists themselves."

Representing Henley on the night will be popular tenor Alex Haigh.

Alex is a patron of the Chiltern Centre for disabled children, to which a share of the evening's profits will be donated, and recently featured in the Aliquando Chamber Choir's production of Felix Mendelssohn's *Elijah* at St Mary's Church, which also raised funds for the charity.

He has been a familiar face on the Henley music scene for some years now, but when did he first discover his talent for performing?

"I guess there were a couple of key moments," he says. "When I was around four years old, I appeared in *The Selfish Giant* at school. I really enjoyed making people laugh and smile. Then when I was 12 my dad took me to Glyndebourne to see *The Marriage of Figaro*. The one question I asked my dad was how they sing with that



Charity work: Alex Haigh

much power. He didn't know but I was determined to find out."

Does he have any musical inspirations, classical or otherwise, to declare?

"When I was growing up, I was a fan of music across the genres and in my teens a keen fan of Metallica. Since I have started a career in classical music, singers like Joyce di Donato inspire me."

While he is best known as an opera singer, Alex is no stranger to choral works.

"It's not surprising from the soloist's point of view that they sing sacred works as well as opera," he says.

"Many composers, like say Handel, wrote for both and so there is a similarity in style. I would have loved to have added stage musicals to the list, but sadly I cannot dance."

Dancing may be out for the moment, but Alex is looking forward to stepping out on to the Kenton stage in aid of a cause that is close to his heart.

"Though I do work for the outreach side of Opera Prelude, I am also a patron of the Chiltern Centre. I was honoured to take over as a patron from my mother when she sadly died. The centre can offer a vast range of care, respite and socialising with people with similar conditions which is unrivalled in the area."

The show starts at 7pm and has a running time of 120 minutes, including a 20-minute interval. Tickets are £30. For more information and to book, visit www.operaprelude.org

Bluesman's playing an intimate show

A FOUNDER member of the Blues Band is playing an intimate solo show at the Crooked Billet in Stoke Row early next month.

Dave Kelly performed his first professional show in 1964 at the Half Moon in Putney.

His 55-year career has seen him work with the likes of Buddy Guy, Peter Green, Junior Wells, Eric Clapton, Freddie King, the Allman Brothers and more.

Dave may have turned 72 earlier this year but retirement is the last thing on his mind. "Why should I retire? I get paid for my hobby," he laughs. The



Experienced: Dave Kelly

show on Monday, December 2, is the latest in the Crooked Billet's regular series of music nights.

Tickets, in the form of a music cover charge, are £15. To reserve a table, call the pub on (01491) 681048.

Fair to help NSPCC

A CHRISTMAS fair in aid of the NSPCC will take place at Phyllis Court Club on Tuesday (November 26).

It will run from 9am to 4pm at the club off Marlow Road.

Attractions include homemade produce, stalls

and a raffle. Prizes include a Christmas hamper from H Café in Market Place, comprising mince pies, a Christmas pudding, tea and coffee.

Entry costs £5 and 10 per cent of sales will go to the NSPCC.



Legendary line-up: Art Kane's 1958 photograph 'A Great Day in Harlem'