

London swings again

With swell openings, boundary-crossing musicians and a flourishing festival, a jazz revival in the British capital evokes John Coltrane's love supreme.

By the end of Blue Note London's opening night, people were dancing beside their dinner tables. Last month, when the legendary New York jazz club made its long-awaited UK debut, jazz enthusiasts, music fans and assorted culture buffs turned out in force. Headlining

the event, in a midnight-blue room beneath the St Martins Lane Hotel in Covent Garden, was Grammy Award-winning American pianist and record producer Robert Glasper and his dexterous band. Close by in Soho, Ronnie Scott's – London's jazz institution since 1959, with a recent transformation of its intimate upstairs space – is still packing the house for two shows a night.

All over London, jazz is jumping. New clubs are opening, established ones are expanding, jam sessions are proliferating and a younger generation is blurring the boundaries between jazz and other genres – from reggae and Afrobeat to hip-hop and electronic music. The annual EFG London Jazz Festival in November will bring together international stars such as Grammy-winning vocalists Samara Joy, Dianne Reeves and Cecile McLorin Salvant, along with British artists including drum and bass pioneer Goldie, who is presenting a major orchestral project, and influential saxophonist Courtney Pine, as well as musicians from Africa, Asia and Australia.

Audiences move from one neighbourhood to another as though they were following a musical map. "You'll get to enjoy the day-to-day life of this incredible city and its cultural influences in a way that removes the barriers between artist and audience," says festival director Pelin Opcin.

Brick Lane, in the East End, is a case in point. During the festival, singer and cellist Ayanna Witter-Johnson will perform her new album at 93 Feet East, while Lily London Presents Jazz Grime takes over Ninety One Living Room, part of the Truman Brewery cultural complex. Between the gigs are vintage retailers, Bangladeshi curry houses and two famed 24-hour beigel (bagel) shops, where queues form for salt-beef beigels long after the clubs have emptied. It is territory familiar to the new jazz generation: April's Brick Lane Jazz Festival has helped turn the area into one of London's liveliest destinations for the music.

In Camden, north London's brash counterculture wonderland of pubs, indie buskers, wandering Goths and sprawling canal-side markets, the iconic Jazz Cafe is evolving. During the festival, the venue will host acts including Nordic house music prodigy Dublon and Melbourne soul outfit The Meltdown, on a stage that has featured everyone from Adele and Amy Winehouse to legendary jazz pianist Herbie Hancock.

After the festival, the Jazz Cafe will expand into the neighbouring building. Its owners have also received planning permission

to develop the Art Deco Rex theatre in Stratford, east London, into a 2300-capacity outpost, Jazz Cafe presents The Rex, to open in early 2028. "This city is full of jazz and jazz-adjacent talent but there really aren't enough opportunities for them to perform throughout the year," says Nick Lewis, musical director of Blue Note. "We want to change that."

As Blue Note's venue ambassador, Robert Glasper will take up a residency at the club during the festival, where his guests will include the rapper and actor Common. Ronnie's festival line-up includes all-female American jazz collective Artemis and London duo Blue Lab Beats.

Still, the arrival of Blue Note – founded in New York in 1981, with outposts from Tokyo to Sao Paulo – has prompted debate over whether London has room for two jazz institutions so close to each other. Both Opcin and Lewis, formerly head of music at Ronnie Scott's, are confident that it does. In the same way that London's West End supports about 40 mainstream theatres, the more jazz venues, they say, the better for everybody. "The bigger the pie, the bigger the slices," says Opcin. "We are lucky to have both venues, but remember we have so many places, big and small, under the festival umbrella."

London's jazz awakening owes much to the genre's knack for reinventing itself by absorbing new influences. London youth organisation Tomorrow's Warriors has nurtured a generation of players whose music draws on their cultural heritage and diverse tastes – from calypso and high life to dubstep and neo-soul. The members of Mercury Prize-winning Ezra Collective are all alumni.

Travel partners Eurostar and Turkish Airlines underscore the festival's international outlook. Turkish Airlines presents the Global Connections series, showcasing artists from around the world, including Malian singer and guitarist Fatoumata Diawara and South African vocal group The Joy. It also highlights cross-cultural collaborations, such as the pairing of Cuban pianist Roberto Fonseca and French cellist Vincent Segal, who will perform their duo album at Cadogan Hall. As part of its four-year partnership with the EFG, the Melbourne International Jazz Festival presents its own free stage at the Barbican.

Back at Blue Note London, where an intimate space called B-Side will open later this year, the branded table plaques break with the tradition of honouring only American greats. Big-name British acts and established icons are referenced, too. Although jazz remains central to its identity, the club has expanded its line-up to include contemporary artists across genres and cultures. The London satellite promises to be even more improvisational.

EFG London Jazz Festival runs from November 13-22 across more than 20 London boroughs. efglondonjazzfestival.org.uk

Photography by Jerris Madison (Dianne Reeves)

From top: the marquee at Blue Note London; Upstairs at Ronnie's; Robert Glasper at Blue Note; singer Dianne Reeves is performing at the EFG festival.

