

JAMMIN' AT THE HAMMOND

by Victor Perry

For the past three years, the Court Avenue Brewing Company in downtown Des Moines has hosted a jazz jam session featuring some of the best players in town. Around 8 p.m. on Mondays, as the dinner crowd finishes up, jazz aficionados congregate in the adjoining bar, enjoying the establishment's excellent coffee. Even before the band begins, what immediately strikes the ear as the musicians scam up is the distinctive sound of the mighty Hammond organ—a rarity in this era of lightweight digital keyboards.

The man responsible, Sam Salomone, has attained the status of an institution in Iowa during the past four decades. Inducted into both the state's jazz and blues halls of fame, Salomone has played with the cream of Iowa's crop of musicians, from doo-wop and rock 'n' roll to blues and jazz. No elitist, he is down-to-earth in the classic Iowa manner. "I wasn't a child prodigy," he says. "It didn't come easy for me."

Originally from Chicago, Salomone's parents moved to Iowa in the early 1960s, where he grew up. Eventually, the family settled in Waterline, first opening a bar and then a pizzeria. The bar "bombed,"

but it was the first gig for his first band, recalled Salomone, who had fallen under the sway of Little Richard, Ray Charles, Fats Domino, and Jerry Lee Lewis. The band also had an aggressive agent, whose connections landed them an eight-week tour backing up Del Shannon, then enjoying success with his monster hit "Little Bona-bona," now considered a classic of early rock 'n' roll. That tour was followed by another backing



the Duprees, who also climbed the charts in 1962 with "You Belong to Me."

Since then, Salomone has toured the Midwest, paying dues from Denver to Peoria while performing in Iowa with acts like the Blue Band and Billy Lee James. He projects a sense of tradition, one further enhanced by his instrument of choice, an old-school Hammond organ, vintage 1965. In contrast to many modern keyboards that look like little more than ironing boards on stage, the Hammond—a bulky 400 pounds of wood and electronic circuitry—always establishes an air of solid dignity. Similarly to classic car buffs, the owners of these throwback instruments buy and restore them, and like Salomone they enjoy discussing various models and modifications.

Such an instrument has never been a small investment for young musicians. "My dad helped me me out with my first one," Salomone recalled.

The Hammond company went out of business in 1975 and reopened in 1992 with a line of digital, MIDI-capable organs. Purists like Salomone, however, are unimpressed. "It's Suzuki," he said dismissively. "They couldn't get the patent for the tone-wheel generators," a key element in the original technology that gave Hammonds their distinctive sound. While Salomone owns a B3, the old Hammond's top-of-the-line model, he plays an A100 model at Court Avenue that he bought five years ago. "I just like the sound better," he explained. "They're all different."

Asked about the organists who shaped his sound, Salomone mentions the usual giants: Jimmy Smith, "Brother" Jack McDuff, Jimmy McGriff, Richard "Cannon" Holmes. He is especially fond of Larry Young, an eclectic, experimental-minded organist who played with Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix and Carlos Santana, among others. "I have the complete boxed set of Young," Salomone said, referring to another weighty old-school possession (become increasingly rare—his vinyl collection; Salomone's fellow musicians speak reverently of his record library). Of course, jazz musicians also draw from those who play instruments besides their own, and Salomone is no exception, citing Illinois Jacquet, Oscar Peterson and Sonny Clark (among others) as influences.

Incidentally, although the occasional horn player or vibraphonist may sit in with the band on Monday nights at the Court Avenue Brewing Company, don't look for a bassist—Salomone will be handling the bass lines quite nicely with his left hand and feet.

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