



David Niu and Martha Chang, the owners of Shanghai Jazz.

A Jazz Love Supreme

David Niu and Martha Chang continue the Shanghai vibe at their Madison supper club

By ZAN STEWART Photo by MAHALA GAYLORD

The evening begins the way it usually does at Shanghai Jazz in Madison: Co-owner Martha Chang taps a circular gong with a cloth-wrapped mallet.

Then David Niu, the other owner, takes the microphone near a corner of the room that serves as a bandstand.

"Good evening everyone, and welcome to Shanghai Jazz. We have some great musicians for you tonight."

Indeed, Shanghai Jazz has been showcasing great musicians most nights for 14 years as one of New Jersey's best jazz clubs; some would say the very best jazz club.

Scores of top talent have graced Shanghai's stage since it opened Oct. 1, 1995. A short list of name

CONTACT INFO

Shanghai Jazz,
24 Main St., Madison

Music: Tuesday-Thursday, 7-9:30 p.m.;
Friday and Saturday,
6:30 and 8:45 p.m.;
Sunday, 6-8:30 p.m.

No music charge;
\$20-\$30 minimum at
tables, \$10 at bar.

Call (973) 822-2899
or visit shanghaijazz.com.

headliners includes Bucky and John Pizzarelli, Marian McPartland, Junior Mance and Stacey Kent.

But Shanghai is more than a jazz joint. It's a throwback to an earlier time when clubs combined first-rate music with fine food. Chang and Niu, who met in 1981 as students at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., call the cuisine at their supper club gourmet Asian.

Their inspiration, they say, came from the type of supper clubs that populated Shanghai, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s.

"That time was an electric period in Chinese history," says Niu, 49, a native of Taipei, Taiwan, and formerly a corporate attorney. "And an integral aspect to Shanghai was jazz, hence our room's name."

Chang, 45, a Madison native who studied Chinese history and politics at Cornell, then Harvard, spent a year in Shanghai as a Fulbright scholar while Niu worked in various cities in China.

"We were just really taken with that whole image of Shanghai glamour," Chang says, citing the club at Shanghai's landmark Peace Hotel as an inspiration. "Shanghai was a very international city. And it was a haven for American musicians, particularly African-Americans, who found a much more hospitable environment with more work and less discrimination than in the U.S." Among the American musicians who thrived was the great trumpeter and composer Buck Clayton, who led bands there in the 1930s before joining Count Basie's orchestra.



Martha Chang's parents, Darwin, left, and Yen Chang, ran the Four Seas restaurant that was the previous incarnation of Shanghai Jazz.

On this night Niu introduces pianist Keith Ingham, guitarist John Zweig and bassist Steve Freeman, including some background information on each one.

Within moments, the musicians are digging into the timeless standard "Just Friends," giving it a swinging mainstream jazz treatment highlighting melody and rhythm.

"Shanghai Jazz is a class act," says the Manhattan-based Ingham, a 10-year veteran of the room and a musician who has worked with many jazz masters, among them Ben Webster and Benny Goodman. "Places like this aren't around, even in New York City."

Says Freeman, a busy Garden State bassist who has played at Shanghai Jazz since 1996: "David and Martha know how to manage the club, balance all the various aspects. They've made it successful."

Initially, Shanghai Jazz offered music only on Wednesdays. The first artist was Jersey guitarist Eddie Hazel. About a month later, Bucky Pizzarelli, who had played with Goodman, Ray Charles and scores of others, came in for what became the first of what are now monthly performances.

Then Niu added Saturdays, then Fridays. Eventually, he booked music six nights a week. "It took off pretty well, and has pretty much stayed that way," he says.

Chang says when they picked the name Shanghai Jazz,

she thought her old Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Nat King Cole vinyls would supply most of the music rather than musicians jamming live six nights a week.

"The Star-Ledger interviewed me for an article. I think this was 1996 or something. I said we were thinking of expanding the music program from Wednesdays and Saturdays. We were probably going to add Fridays," she recalls. "David read the article and said, 'You said you were going to add music on Fridays? I better start booking.' So that's how we came to that."

Word traveled quickly through the tight-knit community of New Jersey musicians, Chang says, and today, some even reach out to Shanghai Jazz to schedule

dates when they are not on the road.

Initially, Shanghai Jazz took over space that had been the Four Seas, a Chinese restaurant owned and operated by Martha's parents, Darwin and Yen Chang.

"We wanted to bring that Shanghai vibe into the 1990s in Madison, to bring music and continue the tradition her parents had started with their wonderful cuisine," says Niu. "We wanted it to be a place where people wouldn't have to go to New York City to hear international jazz artists. You could come here, stay in New Jersey, have a nice celebration."

The club has an eclectic vibe. Asian prints, scrolls and tapestries share space with archival photos of jazz giants like Goodman, Billie Holiday and Fitzgerald — artists Chang grew up listening to as a teen and falling in love with. And there are a few pictures or two of Martha's parents still hanging.

"They had just done it for 10 years, and they wanted to retire because the restaurant business is pretty grueling. It's physical. You are on your feet a lot," Chang says. "My parents wanted to retire and travel while they were able. It just came together. I thought, 'Okay, we'll do it for a couple of months, maybe a year.' Now it's 14 years later."

Yen died in 2003, but Darwin is still robust at 92. Martha Chang says he still drops in frequently.

"We've retained a lot of their customers," she says. ➤

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— David Niu
Co-owner of Shanghai
Jazz in Madison