



The Scotty Barnhart Quartet performs for the Gainesville Friends of Jazz at the Thomas Center in February.

The *beat* goes on

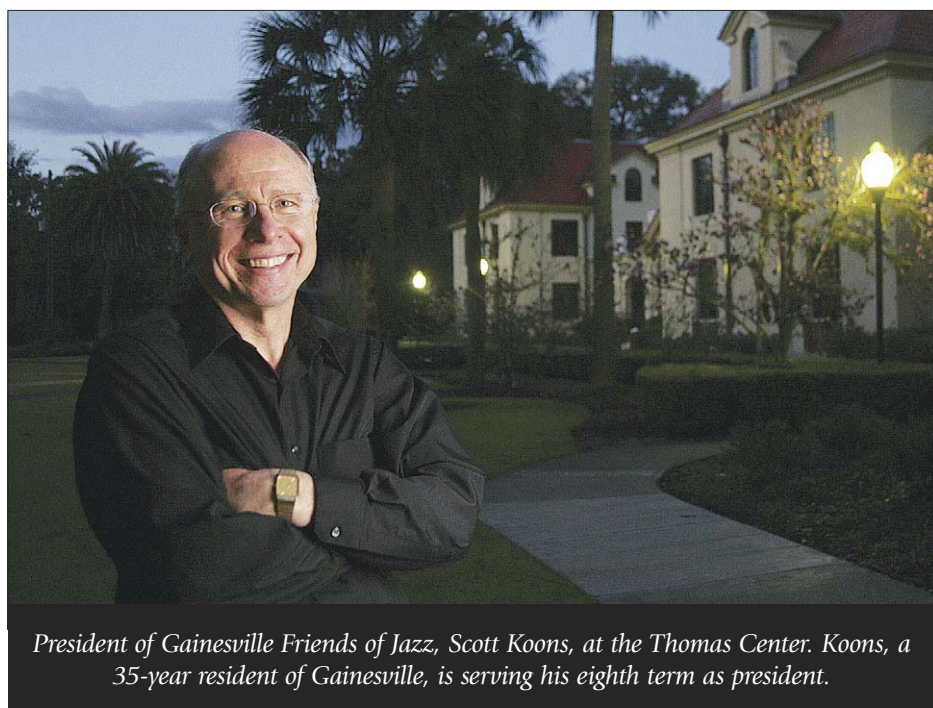
THANKS TO A GROUP OF DEDICATED FRIENDS OF JAZZ, THE MUSIC IS ALIVE AND WELL HERE

STORY BY KELSEY McNIEL

PHOTOS BY ERICA BROUGH

IT BEGAN IN THE EARLY 1980s with a casual conversation among friends at Rick-enbacker’s bar downtown. As on most Mondays, it was jazz night, and dedicated fans Hugh Davis, Frank Sullivan and Bill Hardy were there, eager for their weekly dose.

On this particular Monday, the friends discussed beginning something new — a way to



President of Gainesville Friends of Jazz, Scott Koons, at the Thomas Center. Koons, a 35-year resident of Gainesville, is serving his eighth term as president.



Scotty Barnhart, of the Scotty Barnhart Quartet, performs on trumpet. For listings of performances in the coming months, see Datebook, page 152.

bring more jazz to the community. "The three of us said we need a friends of jazz society," Davis says.

They got right to work. They contacted Lemuel Moore, Gainesville's then director of cultural affairs, and formed a board of jazz enthusiasts.

After they got a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts and a pledge of support from the city, the Gainesville Friends of Jazz was born.

Created with a desire to preserve the American art form, Gainesville Friends of Jazz began in 1983 with 75 avid jazz fans and a plan to spread the beat. Today, the group — supported by an all-volunteer 15-member board of directors and more than 150 memberships — hosts eight to 10 performances a year, devoting more than 100 hours per month to putting the shows together.

"For an all-volunteer, non-profit organization supporting the arts to survive for 30 years is quite an accomplishment," says Scott Koons, 59, who is in his eighth year as president of the organization and is a 35-year resident of Gainesville. "The key to our longevity is the commitment and enthusiasm our members have for great music."

"This is really a labor of love," he adds. "Those of us running the board are very interested in keeping the music alive."

Gainesville Friends of Jazz has brought to town such nationally renowned acts as Branford and Jason Marsalis, Monty Alexander and

Bucky Pizzarelli. The performances are intended for the jazz-obsessed, jazz historians, jazz musicians — and anyone looking for a good time.

"We're not here just to preach to the converted, to the 60-year-old guy who's already a jazz fan," says Marty Liquori, a 15-year board member and director of the annual jazz festival. "We're trying to expose people to jazz who haven't had the opportunity before."

Liquori's love for jazz was sparked by a college dorm-mate and generous album lender. Now a jazz guitarist who performs at Leonardo's 706 twice a week, he's less concerned with jazz's survival than its ability to reach new audiences.

"I don't feel like jazz is an endangered species; it's always going to survive just because of its vitality," says Liquori, 60, a former Olympic runner and member of the USA Track and Field Hall of Fame.

Koons says he is driven to volunteer for the organization by a passion instilled by his jazz-loving father, and a concern that this American-made music may not last without support.

"It's important to maintain it as an art form, and that requires jazz enthusiasts, musicians and those who may only have a casual interest in jazz," Koons says.

The group also encourages jazz appreciation through its annual jazz festival. Originally created to commemorate the group's 20th anniversary eight years ago, the festival is a two-day event in March, filled with performances from regional and national acts.

LIKE JAZZ? LEARN MORE

■ To learn more about upcoming performances and how to become a member of the group, visit Gainesville Friends of Jazz's website, www.gnfriendsofjazz.org. Memberships start at \$35 (\$15 for students) annually and members receive discounted tickets and *The Jazz Notes* newsletter. Group e-mails also include videos of upcoming artists. "If you like jazz and you plan to go to a couple of concerts, it's worth it to join," Liquori says.

"Citizens groups that have artistic programs are important for any community in terms of providing a cultural outlet for the community that are otherwise not there," says Davis, the group's first president, whose wife, Doris, was also an important part of the group's founding.

"The highlight of the Friends of Jazz and what makes it different from other things is that it's a small venue and you're up close with the artist," says Liquori. "It's the intimacy that makes it different. And the interaction between the artist and the audience as he's playing, which I don't get when I go to a 5,000-person concert."

In 2000, the group moved several blocks from its beloved birthplace, the Thomas Center, to what was then the Savannah Grande, a large catering and event venue. The organization flourished, hosting two or more concerts per year, sponsoring jazz clinics taught by members, and providing scholarships for local high school students to attend the University of Florida's Jazz Camp.

"Music in general, jazz in particular, has the ability to really connect with an individual and touch their soul and inner being in a way that other experiences cannot do as effectively," says Koons, who played acoustic bass in his high school's jazz ensemble band.

The Savannah Grande was recently sold, and Gainesville Friends of Jazz has returned to the Thomas Center, though the move is not permanent.

"The Thomas Center cannot hold enough people for us at this point," says Liquori.

Despite being between permanent homes, Gainesville's Friends of Jazz is still attracting strong jazz musicians and bringing Gainesville jazz fans together.

"It's fun. We put in a lot of volunteer time and work, but in the end it's an enjoyable experience. It's all about the music," Koons says. 🎷