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THE IRIDIUM: A SMALL BIG DEAL

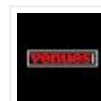
Posted by [Brad Weissberg](#) | Jul 18, 2019 | [General](#), [Pulse](#), [Theaters & Clubs](#) | 0 🗨️



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The Iridium on Broadway in Manhattan is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. (All Photos Courtesy The Iridium)

NYC CLUB, KNOWN AS THE HOME OF LES PAUL, IS CELEBRATING 25 YEARS AND LOOKING TO EXPAND

Ron Strum opened concert venue The Iridium on 63rd Street in Manhattan in 1994 because his father, who owned a restaurant in the space at the time, didn't know what to do with the empty basement.

"Originally, we were thinking about being some kind of dance club," Strum said. "We didn't even know what a promoter was."

The club opened on Dec. 19, 1994, with bassist Jay Leonhart headlining. Now 25 years and thousands of artists and sold tickets later, The Iridium is celebrating what the locals call "the house that Les built."



Guitarist Les Paul had a weekly Monday night residency at The Iridium until his death in 2009.

"Les" would be legendary jazz and blues guitarist Les Paul, who famously played The Iridium every

Monday night in what may have been the country's first off-the-Vegas-Strip residency, usually joined by a who's who of fabled rock stars such as David Bowie, Paul McCartney, Keith Richards, Jimmy Page, Eddie Van Halen, Joe Walsh and Slash.

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**THE
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"We had astronauts like Buzz Aldrin show up and jam with Les. You never know who would be here," Strum recalled of the early days.

The Iridium started as a jazz club, but it quickly made its mark on another front.

"We had to redo the entire basement to make it appealing," Strum said. "We brought in a top guy from Chicago and he went to town. But the place was fanciful and way overdone and it looked like 'Alice in Wonderland' on acid."

The in-your-face design was a hit and by 1995 the club was awarded Best Jazz Club by New York magazine.

Right across from Lincoln Center, The Iridium soon became a hotbed of jazz activity. Winton Marsalis, who helped start the classical jazz



Jimmie Vaughan plays The Iridium in NYC.

summer concert series at Lincoln Center and went on to become the center's artistic director, would leave his gigs at Lincoln Center and go down to the club to have jam sessions.

"It just took off from there," Strum said. "We were always an artist-friendly club and that produced interesting pairings like Winton playing with Lionel Hampton and other jazz matchups. The fans got to see these legends up close and personal."

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The club does 65% jazz and blues and 35% rock today. The rock programming started when The Iridium moved from 63rd Street to 1605 Broadway in 2001 after a dispute with their landlord, NYC nightclub and hotel owner Ian Schrager. Les Paul designed the sound system; it's still in place today.

"We started booking more contemporary acts in the new space," Strum said. "We wanted to be more rock, blues, and jazz to pay tribute to Les, who played in many different genres. It took a few years for people to catch on to what we were doing."



Tickets for a show last fall by Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top went for \$500.

Les Paul died in 2009. Jeff Beck led a salute on Paul's 95th birthday after the guitar great's passing with a guest list that included Charlie Watts, Brian Setzer, Bowie and Imelda May.

The 170-seat club can go head-to-head with larger venues because it pays, Strum said. Cover

charges can run from \$30 for a regular show up to \$500, which Billy Gibbons charged at his show last fall.

"We have the history of Les Paul, and any guitarist worth their salt wants to play on Les' stage," Strum said. "We have historical value and are the real deal. Every month or so, we have superstar on stage. It's a small big deal."

The Iridium is looking at a big fall to mark its 25th anniversary. The celebration will continue all the way

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JUL 24 Wed (https://www.venuesnow.com/industry-calendar/action~oneday/exact-date~7-24-2019/) all-day 2019 International Festival Forum (https://www.venuesnow.com/event/2019-international-festival-forum/? instance_id=57)

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through the actual date that the club opened, Dec. 19, with “superstars we can’t say yet.”

The Iridium has also hosted “Front and Center,” the public television series that puts together industry veterans and new musicians, and “MTV Live Setlist,” which showcases next-generation talent.

Other artists that have played The Iridium stage over the last 25 years include Joe Jackson, Rob Thomas, Tom Bailey,



The Eagles’ Joe Walsh takes the stage regularly.

Dua Lipa, George Ezra, Stanley Jordan, Jimmie Vaughan, Macy Gray, Sheryl Crow, Zakk Wylde, Steve Miller, Buddy Guy, Joe Satriani, Mick Taylor, Muna, Max Roach and Michael Brecker.

Strum is looking to expand into other markets, possibly Los Angeles, but waiting for the fall festivities at the club to look for a location in another city.

“We have a rabid fanbase and I want to get it up to fever pitch this fall. We have fans that brag that they come to 30 to 40 shows a year,” he said. “Pound per pound and square foot by square foot, I don’t think any other venue in the world has had as many rock and jazz stars as we have. There’s really no other place that can do what we can do, which is to offer a real, intimate experience.”

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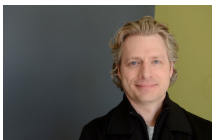
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Brad Weissberg

Brad has been writing about the world of entertainment for over 25 years and has had work published in VenuesNow; Pollstar; Famous; Woman's Day; New Ideas, NW; The Daily Mail; Entertainment Weekly; Le Monde; Grazia; Heat; The New York Post; The National Enquirer; Star Magazine; and many more.

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