

Old School: A Little Afternoon Jazz on East Houston Street

By Schaeen Fox | Photos by Vicki Fox

In October, I had the good fortune to see Carol Morgan at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola performing as a member of the DIVA jazz orchestra. She took a trumpet solo that was so extraordinarily beautiful I was still marveling about it weeks later. Then I turned to Michael Steinman's Jazz Lives blog and saw a story entitled "SECRET STROLLERS: CORIN STIGGALL, CAROL MORGAN, CHUCK WILSON (Milano's, Nov. 4, 2014)." It is a wonderful piece that waxes eloquently about the talents of Ms. Morgan and Mr. Wilson and their Tuesday (1-3 PM) and Thursday (2-4 PM) afternoon gigs at Milano's on East Houston Street in New York's East Village.

The next Thursday I found my way into that bar for their gig and felt like I had stepped back in time to my early college years. The place by itself is worth a visit. Except for Prohibition, it has been quenching thirsts for roughly 130 years. This place has enough atmosphere for a Raymond Chandler novel. I'd believe it if anyone told me that Weegee used to sit by the door with his Speed Graphic camera ready to dash off for a night's work. It is a resolutely working class/bohemian bar, and Jackie, the bartender, seems to know, and control, all her loyal patrons.

The lighting is reduced to the point where it was hard to make out most of the hundreds of photos and such that blanket the walls. While the vast majority seems to be of locals, some were more interesting: a big 1960 campaign button for

Jack Kennedy, a photo of DiMaggio and Monroe, some of Sinatra as well as a photo of five Yankees. That last one appeared to be autographed but was too far into the shadows to be sure.

The band performed at the back of the room: Chuck Wilson and bassist Corin Stiggall stood by one wall with Carol seated by the other. They weren't far apart. The place is so narrow it affects the shape of the band. There is literally no space for a piano or a full drum kit. Bass and guitar provided rhythm.

Guitarist Larry Corbin had to move aside whenever anyone went into the back. They were well into "Red Top" when I took my place. I sat so close to Carol and Chuck that we easily chatted between numbers. Just like the patrons that lined the bar, the musicians were relaxed and enjoying themselves.

Everyone seemed to know everyone else. After one number Mr. Stiggall responded to our applause with, "Thank you for listening. You make us play better." That brought a hardy and loud obscenity from the far end of the bar which set off a colorful back and forth of English that usually does not make it into this journal. It produced a lot of laughs and let me dream that this was what it



Jazzers Chuck Wilson and Carol Morgan toot their horns barside Tuesday and Thursday afternoons at Milano's in the East Village.



"Milano is a uber dive — ol' school cash register, great juke box, lovely bartender with a stiff pour named Michelle, it's heaven. There is nothing to hate about this place, except for this English tourist couple at the end of the bar flaunting about their lavish shopping spree." — Dave K./yelp.com, 6/14/14

would have been like to have been back in a Kansas City bar during the '30s when that town was a wide open mecca for major talent playing jazz around the clock.

Each selection played resulted from a group discussion, and some talks became extended. In one Chuck said, "I've been listening to a Sonny Stitt recording for months now." It revealed his dedication to his art. When she felt one discussion was too long Jackie called, "Sometime today would be good." More music soon followed. Some selections were, "Ask Me Now," "The Best Thing for You (Would Be Me)," and "I'll Remember April." All were beautifully played.

I first became aware of Chuck Wilson during his three years with the Buddy Rich Big Band. During the break we chatted about his friendship with Buddy and his subsequent musical career. Chuck added that when he moved into the neighborhood, there were many bars like Milano's but now it is the lone survivor. Carol, who also lives close by, added that, "Joe Cohn is a regular guest and Murray Wall has joined us once... so far. I think Murray lives nearby, too — so we fully expect him to return." Both remarks are added reasons to stroll on back to Malano's one day soon.