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### The Baked Potato – Avoiding the Fate of the Mashed

Since arriving in L.A. – the end of the western world, not to mention the entertainment center of the universe – I have found solace in killing a couple of exhilarating hours (and anticipating the shitty wake-up the next day) from time to time at Studio City’s premier jazz club, the Baked Potato. Founded in 1970, the hole-in-the-wall venue has gained notoriety for its distinctive dishes (based around the titular foodstuff) and hosting some legendary jazz musicians. The acts that have performed there in the last decade include commendable studio sticksman Steve Gadd and Volto!, a fusion group that counts Danny Carey, drummer of Tool, among its ranks.

Besides the credibility of the impressive



The Baked Potato’s welcoming yellow glow in April.

roster of musicians that have played the Potato, and the more tangible awards bequeathed unto it in its decades of service (i.e. “Best Jazz Club” by *Los Angeles* magazine in 2010), the club has etched its place into the archives of entertainment. It received a name-drop in the 2016 critical darling of a film *La La Land*. In the same year, renowned Megadeth drummer Nick Menza unexpectedly died of congestive heart failure during a gig there with the band OHM. The iconic status of the club ensured that pilgrimages by the faithful remained constant, until just over two years ago – when the pandemic abruptly cut the sound.

The Baked Potato heralded its 50th year in business in early 2020 with no streamed performances or anything on its calendar. In June, select shows began again with a 32-member audience limit. This wasn’t to last – by July, fundraising livestreams had taken over as the outlook worsened. While conventional audiences were welcomed back in April 2021, with the slight inconvenience of raised ticket prices, a hell of a fight had happened behind the scenes.

The Baked Potato’s chief proprietor, Justin Randi, who runs the Baked Potato alongside its founder – his father and session ace Don Randi – clarified the sacrifices made on his part to keep the venue afloat, which culminated in the selling of his house and car to keep the Baked Potato alive. “It only took twenty years to get that Ferrari,” he said.

As the establishment could not be classified in a decisive manner as either a restaurant or a venue (like the Staples Center) by the Los Angeles government, it was hit especially hard by the pandemic.

After installing a \$100,000, five-camera system for livestreaming performances (purchased, in a prophetic fashion, in 2019), a patio area for more remote live viewing, and extending the stage to keep more distance between musicians, Randi felt prepared to meet whatever the pandemic could throw at the venue. Nevertheless, the Potato was soon hit with an

order from the L.A. health department after a new change in the city's permit rules: close the patio area, or just stream the occasional performance. Knowing that L.A. mayor Eric Garcetti is personally aware of the Baked Potato, Randi remembers constantly calling the mayor's office, threatening legal action for the unjust treatment. He wishes that L.A. had been on his side as the pandemic unleashed its toughest tribulations upon the live music experience.

When I last paid it a visit, April 6, the act of the night – revered guitarist Larry Carlton's family band – was in full swing, leaving behind that indelible impression of intimacy that an arena show could not hope to deliver.

The joint was packed with an appropriately music-savvy crowd, of which I was the youngest by some margin. While waiting outside for the first set to finish, I overheard two old-timers comment on some passing motorbikes in that witty, sardonic fashion perfected by the passage of time – “the raw sound of insecurity!” As I took my place inside, the bartender deployed drinks as only a seasoned master of that storied profession could. All seemed like business as usual. One would not imagine that the club was on its knees not long ago.



Larry Carlton's guitar. The venue has a no photography/recording policy during performances.

Gail Burlingame, a long-time patron, remembers firsthand the tangible danger that the club was in last year and in 2020, when she turned to donating in order to view the livestreaming fundraisers that the Potato hosted. She was relieved when the Potato began allowing full audiences back inside in the spring of last year.

“As soon as things opened up, I was ready to go, I risked it,” she told me. “You can’t take the place of...the fingers. The emotion. The connection.”

As the club enters its heyday again, the residual effects of the pandemic are still being felt. The Potato was only permitted to stop checking vaccination cards for entry a week before my Carlton visit. The worst may have subsided, but the club is far from the clear it was in during the glory days of 2019.

While the Baked Potato is alive and well, its name might not carry the weight for LMU students that it does for jazz cats. There are, however, a select few Lions that know of this very special spot. Senior Hunter Livsey, a musician himself, is one of them.

“It’s my favorite venue I’ve been to. I like looking around and seeing no young people,” he explains.

Livsey managed to witness the already-packed-in Potato’s increased COVID-19 sense of viscosity after seeing keyboardist Scott Kinsey’s band perform with just 15 others in the audience. This unprecedented intimacy left its impression on the drummer: “The best show I’ve ever been to in my life,” Livsey recalls.

“[As far as venues I’d like to play]...the Baked Potato is number one,” Livsey enthuses. “I just have to get my chops up.” It’s safe to say that as long as young enthusiasts like this author and Livsey are around, there is a bright future ahead for the best jazz club in L.A.