

From the Ventura County Star:

All that jazz

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A desire to keep live jazz alive and well has been the inspiration behind the Channel Cities Jazz Club, a decades-old nonprofit corporation dedicated to supporting live jazz music performance.

Judging by its popularity, the demand is there.

For more than 20 years, the group has offered monthly meetings at the Pacific Corinthian Yacht Club in Oxnard, where featured bands present repertoires of traditional, swing and other jazz forms. Everyone is welcome — and they show up. It's not unusual for 150 people to turn out for the monthly gatherings.

"One of our goals is to provide a place for musicians to play jazz music and for fans to enjoy it," said member Karl Keller of Ventura, public relations manager for the club. "Second, we provide scholarships to aspiring middle and high school students to attend summer jazz camps, where they can learn from professional musicians."

The club currently has about 125 members — ranging in age from young adults to senior citizens — who meet the third Sunday each month, from 1 to 4:30 p.m., at the Pacific Corinthian Yacht Club, 2600 S. Harbor Blvd., in Channel Islands Harbor.

The meetings are open to the public, and typically attract up to 150 people.

"Only a few members of the club are musicians," Keller said. "Most are jazz fans, who come to enjoy the music each month. Many also like to dance."

A member for five years with the Channel Islands club, "I'm a working musician, so it gives me a chance to play, to meet and hear other musicians and featured bands, and to get to know some of the jazz fans," Keller said.

Each Sunday session features a professional band, ranging from a singer and accompanying quartet to a traditional big band. Occasionally, the group will showcase a local middle school or high school jazz band.

"At each session, there are also several jam sets of qualified volunteer musicians who make up informal groups of six to eight musicians and play their favorite tunes," said Keller, adding that there is a monthly raffle, as well.

In addition to the monthly meetings, the group annually sponsors area middle and high school students on scholarships to summer jazz camps.

"We finance this through club dues, raffles and donations," Keller said.

For instance, the group sent seven students to the Sacramento Traditional Jazz Society summer jazz camp this past summer, where they spent a week studying improvisation, taking theory into practice and having nightly jam sessions with the help of experienced jazz artists, said Dawn Russum, club president.

The music enjoyed at monthly gatherings is comprised of standards everyone recognizes, from songs that were popular from the '20s through the '50s, she added.

"The dance floor is almost always full, and there is a very friendly and outgoing social atmosphere," Russum said. "In addition to being able to reach more people that are interested in listening to this wonderful music, we are also encouraging more qualified musicians to come and jam with our jammers."

Club member Bob Gaston of Oxnard was a part-time musician "into

my 30s, and then I quit playing because of the demands of my day gig.'

"I retired in 1998, and a couple of years later, I began to play again," said the 75-year-old. "Now I'm really having fun playing at this and other jazz clubs — and, with plenty of time to practice, I now play quite a bit better than I did in my youth."

A member of the jazz club for five years, he enjoys playing his music, "but the social aspect is also very important to me," said Gaston, who also is the editor of the club's monthly newsletter. "I am enjoying the opportunity to write about jazz personalities and jazz music."

The club is unique, he said, because of the members and overall vibe the group creates.

"People come to have a good time in a very attractive setting," he said. "The music is great for dancers and for listening, and the hired guest bands — different each month — guarantee that we have a nice variety of musical presentations throughout the year."

Henry Johnsen, 78, of Oxnard, has been involved with the club since its inception.

"We are a family," he said. "If you love and support the music, you are one of us, part of our family."