



Swinging high

In the lead-up to Hong Kong's jazziest season, **Rob Garratt** looks back on how the local jazz scene has evolved over the years — with a new generation of homegrown players breaking the mold.



Above: Celebrated jazz bassist Ron Carter meets Clarence Chang, a pioneer of jazz culture in Hong Kong.



Above: Pianist Ted Lo, the first Chinese graduate of the Berklee College of Music in the United States, in 1976, is part of the upcoming Freespace Jazz Fest.

Right: Besides hosting regular gigs, the homegrown jazz collective Fountain de Chopin also offers Hong Kong's only formal jazz education program.



A decade ago, no one thought much about Hong Kong's putative jazz scene. But those days are hard to imagine looking at the city's cultural calendar, as we enter the jazziest time of the year.

The next few weeks will see the city welcome performances from a pair of American legends, trumpeter Jon Faddis and vocal star Dianne Reeves, as well as Japanese national treasure Hiromi. Meanwhile, the four-day Freespace Jazz Fest returns for a seventh edition, solidifying its spot in the local psyche.

On the homegrown music front, bassist Justin Siu recently launched an intimate twice-a-month concert series, *The Blue Study Live*, and homegrown jazz hangout Chez Trente is preparing to host its first multi-day festival, CT Music Fest Vol 3, on Cheung Chau Island.

While once jazz fans waited months between shows, now there is more happening than any listener could hope to absorb. "It's pretty cool. Today people go to see jazz like going to a movie," observes Hong Kong guitarist Teriver Cheung.

Learning to play

A raft of homegrown gigs takes place all year round. Every week, chilled Central hangout Chez Trente

hosts four gigs and jams, while there are at least two more intimate performances at Sai Ying Pun's Coda. However, the game changer might be Fountain de Chopin in San Po Kong. As well as hosting regular gigs, the jazz collective offers Hong Kong's only formal jazz education program.

This enthusiastic, dedicated, grassroots hub "gives a really good push to the young Hong Kong generation," says Chez Trente founder Joe Leung. "Fountain made jazz very popular. A lot of young people are playing it right now."

Fountain de Chopin offers a four-month course, allowing aspiring players to study a song in depth, before playing it together with their peers. "It's important to learn how to play — but it's just as important to jam and make new friends so that you can continue playing," says pianist Bowen Li, co-founder of both Coda and Fountain de Chopin, who estimates around 150 players have already studied at the latter.

"Back in the day if you wanted to study jazz you were like a monk — try hard and give up everything else," Cheung says. "Nowadays it's become a normal thing to do in Hong Kong — like playing badminton."

An inclusive space

In 2000, the city's Leisure and Cultural Services Department made the first concerted effort toward popularizing the genre, by starting the *Jazz Up* series. So far they have presented eight lecture series and 70 live shows, including the annual Jazz Marathon, begun in 2018.

Since 2019 the annual Freespace Jazz Fest has played a huge role in stripping the genre of stuffy stereotypes with its vibrant programming of free outdoor weekend gigs. "Freespace has become a regular hangout for

people," says Cheung. "It's made jazz part of the city's lifestyle."

Therefore, the relatively modest line-up of its 2025 edition is unlikely to disappoint the casual listener, enjoying a day out on the lawns of Art Park. While an audience of hundreds dug deep to see the world's most famous living jazz musician, Herbie Hancock, in 2024, this year's international headliner is British pianist Joe Webb, making his Hong Kong debut. He promises to mix jazz with classical and rock influences, "reimagined from the 1920s to the 2020s."

"Music is for everyone," says the pianist, adding that he hopes his show will encourage more musicians to listen to improvised music. On his last East Asia tour, which included a stop at the legendary Blue Note in Beijing, Webb remembers exchanging notes with fellow Chinese musicians. "We spoke about musicians who inspire us and shared our favorite albums with each other," he says.

Little Big moments

Long before the local government or cultural organizations got involved, music producer Clarence Chang played a pioneering role in bringing legends like Hancock and jazz pianist and composer Chick Corea to Hong Kong. From 2005-19, Chang hosted more than 80 gigs as part of the Jazz World Live Series. "Those concerts were very important in bringing some awareness of what jazz is to people," says Eugene Pao, often referred to as the "godfather" of Hong Kong's jazz guitar scene.

In 2021, Chang began the Jazz in the Neighborhood series, which is presenting Hiromi's *Sonicwonder* concert and brought the American quartet Aaron Parks Little Big to Tsuen Wan



Aaron Parks Little Big band members meet Hong Kong fans who braved the looming Typhoon Ragasa to attend a concert by the quartet in Tsuen Wan Town Hall on Sept 22. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Tsuen Wan Town Hall on Sept 22, the night before Typhoon Ragasa struck the city.

"You could feel the tension in the air," remembers Aaron Parks, who plays piano in the quartet. "At the same time, there was intimacy in the room. Everyone who came had really chosen to be there despite the incoming weather, and that gave the performance an extra layer of focus. It felt like we were all in it together."

Parks' Hong Kong concert was followed by a tour of Shanghai, Hangzhou and Beijing, where his music found a "special resonance". He says that there's "something powerful" about bringing improvised music to fresh markets "where people are open and curious".

In Beijing the quartet performed alongside *guzheng* player Lucy Luan. "I was struck by how beautifully her sound fit within the music we were creating together," Parks says. "Encounters like that expand the possibilities of what improvised music can be."

Community bonding

Ahead of Parks' Hong Kong show, a raft of local millennial and Gen-Z musicians — including pianists Li, Patrick Lui and Daniel Chiu, guitarists Cheung and Alan Kwan, and harmonica player CY Leo — shared excited endorsements of his influence, a sign of the extent to which live shows featuring international stars can inspire local acts.

However, the enthusiasm on display also underlined how far the local jazz scene has grown in recent years. When Cheung began playing in the early 2000s, "it was just Eugene and Ted Lo and a bunch of expats," he says. "Now I can't keep up with the number of musicians, and all the talent."

In between Cheung spent more

than a decade in the United States. Following his return to Hong Kong in 2016, he was among the city's first millennial generation of jazz players, alongside Lui, percussionist Anna Fan and guitarist William Lam — a trio of graduates of the elite Berklee College of Music. "Ten years ago, there were usually one or two kids going to Berklee every year," adds Leung. "Now you've got at least 10 kids coming back after studying jazz overseas every year."

"Maybe parents are more open today," ventures the self-taught Pao. "Back in the day they were more conservative, they thought being a musician was a less reputable thing."

Li — who as part of the Bowen Li Trio released the group's debut album, *Unemployed*, recently — chimes with Pao, confirming that in the early days, playing jazz made him feel "like an alien," whereas nowadays "it's a big community". "Jazz used to be a form of worship, idolizing the stars, but now we have our own audience, our own culture, our own circle — it's way more healthy," he says.

IF YOU GO

The Blue Study Live: Chapter 1
Dates: Oct 25, Nov 20 and 27, Dec 4 and 11
Venue: L4, 17 JCCAC, 30 Pak Tin Street, Shek Kip Mei
<https://www.art-mate.net/doc/81407?name=One+World+Harmony+Limited>

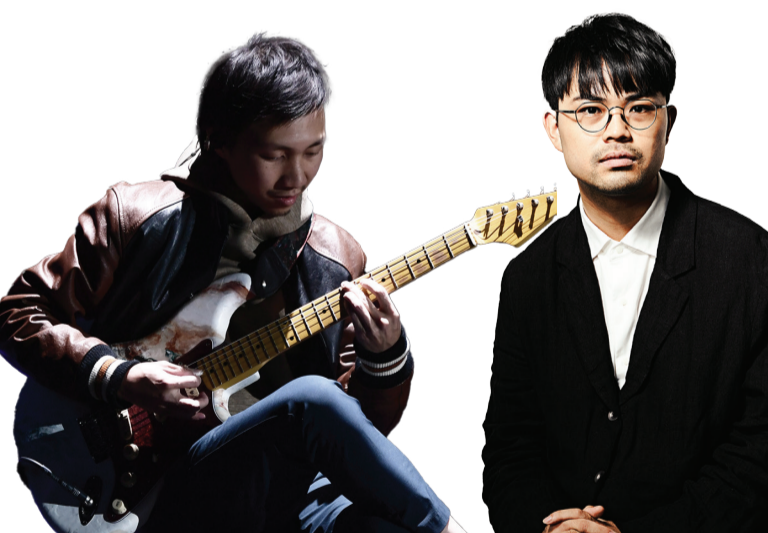
Jon Faddis Quartet
Dates: Oct 29-30
Venue: Tea House Theatre, Xiqu Centre, 88 Austin Road West, Tsim Sha Tsui
<https://www.westk.hk/en/event/jon-faddis-quartet>

Freespace Jazz Fest 2025
Dates: Nov 6-9
Venues: Great Lawn, Harbour-side Lawn, Art Park, Freespace, West Kowloon Cultural District
<https://www.westk.hk/en/event/freespace-jazz-fest>

Dianne Reeves
Date: Nov 10
Venue: Grand Theatre, Xiqu Centre, 88 Austin Road West, Tsim Sha Tsui
<https://www.westk.hk/en/event/dianne-reeves>

CT Music Fest Vol 3
Date: Nov 21
Venue: Cheung Chau Sai Yuen, DD CC Lot 12, Cheung Chau Island
<https://www.saiyuen.com/en/Up-coming-Events/CT-Music-Fest-Vol-3>

Hiromi's Sonicwonder
Date: Nov 24
Venue: Tsuen Wan Town Hall, 72 Tai Ho Road, Tsuen Wan
<https://www.jitn.org/en/project/jitn-hiromis-sonicwonder/>



Above: Guitarist Teriver Cheung says the annual Freespace Jazz Fest at WestK has played a pivotal role in making jazz a part of the city's lifestyle.



Above: Fountain de Chopin founder Bowen Li says around 150 aspiring jazz musicians have trained at the facility since 2021.



Above: The "godfather" of Hong Kong's jazz guitar scene, Eugene Pao, credits Clarence Chang with raising awareness of jazz in Hong Kong.



Above: Pianist Joyce Cheung joins Ted Lo in a cross-generational performance at the upcoming Freespace Jazz Fest.



Above: Making his Hong Kong debut at Freespace Jazz Fest, British pianist Joe Webb promises to mix jazz with classical and rock influences.

Art Hong Kong artists shine bright at Florence Biennale

By **MARIELLA RADAELLI**

Four artists from Hong Kong — Liu Hongrui, Eva Ku, Cheng Xiaowei, and Ho Chun-yu — are taking part in the 15th Florence Biennale. The current edition features more than 600 mid-career and emerging artists from 84 countries and regions.

"Diverse styles, techniques, and media embody the philosophy of the Florence Biennale," says the event's director, Jacopo Celona. "Our selection of Hong Kong artists highlights this diversity across various fields, including painting, photography, and fine art jewelry, reflecting the richness of contemporary artistic expression."

Born in Shenzhen and raised in Hong Kong, Liu is currently based in London. The artist says that his oil and distemper on canvas work, *White Landscape*, is informed by the Surrealists' fascination with the relationship between inner lives and the world. It is an expressionistic landscape, with blobs and dots of color suggesting buildings rising from behind the hills and reflected on the sea water in the foreground. While the Hong Kong

landscape features are obvious, Liu says that the painting has traces of England in it as well.

Liu says he carries Hong Kong in his heart, no matter where he is based. He adds that "the imagery of Hong Kong, its atmosphere as I remember it and a sense of belonging there" usually find their way into his works, and *White Landscape* is no exception. It is a serene piece of work, created with overlapping brushstrokes that emerge from a residue of encounters and experiences left in the artist's mind.

Liu says that the Les Nabis artists — French Post-Impressionist and Symbolist painters, active in Paris toward the end of the 19th century — particularly Pierre Bonnard, are a major influence on him. His Chinese inspirations include Qiu Xiaofei, whose ability to articulate memories through representation fascinates him.

Ku has eight paintings in the exhibition. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* depicts a fantastical scene, awash with bold colors. The mixed-media piece incorporates collage, image transfer, and painting. In this whimsical image, the women sport weird hairdos and share



Clockwise from top left: Works by Hong Kong artists featured in the ongoing Florence Biennale include *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Eva Ku; *White Landscape* by Liu Hongrui; Ho Chun-yu's maze-like images captured on instant film and a jewelry line inspired by ancient Chinese bronze artifacts by Cheng Xiaowei.



space with a strange creature. Ku says she draws inspiration from fairy tales, books, and films that shaped her childhood.

Another of her works, called *Earth's Cry*, is a semi-abstract painting. It is Ku's response to heavy rain in Hong Kong causing a landslide and emphasizes the co-existence of beauty and fragility in nature.

Ku adds that she does not have a signature style as she does not want to limit her choices. Her artworks are "spontaneous creations"; significantly influenced by Hong Kong stalwart Gaylord Chan and the Russian-French master Marc Chagall.

Guangzhou-born, Hong Kong-based jewelry artist Cheng is presenting her collection titled *The Bronze Era*. The nine pieces in it are inspired by the decorative patterns found on bronze artifacts from the Shang Dynasty (c. 16th century-11th century BC) and Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century-256 BC).

Cheng presents ancient decorative artisanal filigree work with a modern twist. Each piece is meticulously handcrafted in her Hong Kong workshop. "One finds the East-meets-West design

philosophy in my work," Cheng says, adding that she counts the Chinese master painters Wu Guanzhong and Zao Wou-ki among her inspirations.

Hong Kong-born Ho Chun-yu is into camera-less photography. He is presenting a series of artworks under the title, *From Cloud to Ground*. Though he doesn't use a camera, Ho applies techniques of both analog and digital photography to process his works, creating maze-like images on instant film.

In their own distinct ways, all of these works reflect the biennale's theme this year — "the sublime essence of light and darkness: concepts of dualism and unity in contemporary design". They all highlight a mix of opposites — tradition and innovation, the East and West, inner worlds and the external world, creation and destruction — while also drawing attention to ideas of harmony and symmetry.

IF YOU GO

The 15th Florence Biennale
Dates: Through Oct 26
Venue: Fortezza da Basso, viale Filippo Strozzi 1, Florence
www.florencebiennale.org/en/