

Pioneer Valley Jazz Shares, Connecticut River Valley, Western Massachusetts, United States

Pioneer Valley Jazz Shares (www.jazzshares.org) is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization founded by Glenn Siegel and Priscilla Page in 2012 with the purpose of presenting an annual concert series throughout communities in the Connecticut River Valley (historically referred to as the “Pioneer Valley”) of western Massachusetts. Now in its tenth season, Jazz Shares has become an integral part of the region’s musical ecosystem and an important contributor to the region’s cultural diversity and vitality, with concerts having occurred in twenty-one venues in small and large towns across Franklin, Hampden, and Hampshire Counties.¹ In a 2016 guest column for the Rova Saxophone Quartet’s *Food for Thought* blog, Siegel describes the impetus to create Jazz Shares and the context from which it emerged:

Over two evenings in the summer of 2012, my partner Priscilla Page and I invited to our home about 70 friends and neighbors who share our love of creative music. I’ve been producing jazz concerts for almost 30 years for the Fine Arts Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Each season I would receive many more worthy gig requests than I could honor. With a limit on how many University concerts I could produce each year (six), and without the personal resources to just write checks, I got tired of saying “Sorry, no” to some of my musical heroes. I knew there must be another way to bring these great musicians to town.²

The positive responses garnered during these discussions persuaded Siegel and Page to launch Jazz Shares with a concert by pianist Angelica Sanchez and guitarist Omar Tamez on November 4, 2012, in Holyoke, Massachusetts.

Inspired by the community-supported agriculture (CSA) movement, Jazz Shares is based on a shareholder model. Concertgoers invest in a season by purchasing a “share,” a membership entitling them to ten concert admissions over an annual season consisting of ten or more concerts (half share memberships are also available, offering five admissions per season). Concerts are also open to the public, and anyone may purchase individual tickets for each event. Most shareholders purchase their shares just before a season begins, usually before the complete schedule is announced. This indeterminate aspect of shareholding—shareholders might not know the full lineup of artists in a season before purchasing a share or might not be familiar with music of some or even all of the artists in a given season—is what distinguishes Jazz Shares from other traditional subscription-based concert series. It is analogous to the indeterminacy of a traditional CSA farm share in which shareholders do not know what produce, and in what quantities, will be available via their share.

Indeed, the prevalence of CSA farm shares in western Massachusetts is perhaps one of the most important contributors to the success of the series, offering a readily available set of principles and practices for potential shareholders. Having originated in Europe and Japan, the first CSA in the United States was founded in 1985 in western Massachusetts, thus providing a local tangible model familiar to Jazz Shares founders Siegel and Page.³ For participants in the local farm share economy, the idea of purchasing a share to support a season of Jazz Shares programming is an easy extension of a proven community-oriented collaborative funding model. “By pooling resources, energy and know-how,” explains the Jazz Shares website, using language common in the local CSA community, “members [shareholders] create an infrastructure that is able to bring world-class improvisers to our region.”⁴

For its first five years, Jazz Shares operated through a fiscal arrangement with the Northampton Center for the Arts, whose director Penny Burke was an early supporter of the series. Jazz Shares filed for its own tax-exempt status on December 17, 2017, at which time Siegel and Page formed a volunteer board of directors, for which they assumed the positions of president and vice president, respectively.⁵ Usually addressed by the working titles of “cofounding directors,” Siegel and Page are the heartbeat of the organization and share the responsibilities of almost all necessary work to administer the series, with Siegel assuming primary responsibility for selecting performers. The two met in 2004, when the Magic Triangle concert series and New World Theater, both part of the Fine Arts Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass), coproduced a performance of “In What Language,” a project led by Vijay Iyer and Mike Ladd. Now an assistant professor of theater at UMass, Page was then serving as program curator for New World Theater, an important regional multicultural theater presenter. Siegel and Page eventually became a couple and married in 2020. Through wedding donations, they raised more than \$6,000 for Jazz Shares.

Since its beginning, Jazz Shares has aimed to sell around one hundred individual shares each season at \$125 per share, with a goal of generating an annual operating budget of at least \$12,000. Additional revenue comes from business shares, whose logos appear on the Jazz Shares website and in publicity materials, as well as individual half shares and tickets sold via the website and at the door of each event for nonshareholders. Altogether, this supports around ten concerts each season (often more) and provides funding for venue rentals, professional sound support, and other costs associated with producing concerts. Artists receive a fee of \$1,000, regardless of the size of the group, as well as a meal (usually home-cooked) and lodging at a local hotel or homestay.⁶ Jazz Shares has met its annual revenue goals in each of its ten seasons, thus proving that the CSA-inspired model is working. And, remarkably, Jazz Shares often ends each season with a modest budget surplus to roll into the following season.

An important reason for the success of Jazz Shares is due to Siegel's more than thirty years of experience presenting concerts in western Massachusetts, during which he forged trusting relationships with many musicians and developed a sizable audience for his events. Originally from the borough of Queens in New York, he moved to western Massachusetts in 1980 a few years after completing an undergraduate degree at the State University of New York, Oneonta, where he played baseball. He began taking courses at UMass in an individual concentration degree program and eventually volunteered to help produce events for two important ongoing series: Bright Moments, an annual summer music festival in the 1980s and 1990s presented by the Fine Arts Center, and the Black Musicians Conference, an annual event founded in 1971 by the WEB DuBois Department of Afro-American Studies. The latter was adopted by the Fine Arts Center's New World Theater (led by Roberta Uno) in 1983, and from 1991 to its conclusion in 1999 was coordinated by Horace Boyer, then associate director of the Fine Arts Center. It was rebranded as a festival in its final two years.⁷

In 1990, Siegel founded the Fine Arts Center's annual Magic Triangle⁸ concert series, whose inaugural event featured Trio Unique, with trombonist Steve Turre, tuba player Bob Stewart, and pianist Mulgrew Miller. Shortly after, Siegel was hired as paid staff by the Fine Arts Center. After volunteering as a host at WMUA (the UMass student and community radio station), he also assumed an additional staff position as station advisor under the Office of Student Activities, while coordinating a decade-long weekday morning schedule of jazz programming and hosting his own eclectic "Jazz in Silhouette" program. Siegel stepped down as station advisor in 2015 and retired from the Fine Arts Center in October 2021. Subsequently, after thirty-three years, Magic Triangle's final concert took place on April 21, 2022, and featured a collaboration between percussionist and composer Adam Rudolph's Go: Organic Orchestra and Brooklyn Raga Massive.⁹

Jazz Shares benefits from Siegel's and Page's extensive experiences at the Fine Arts Center and builds upon a rich tradition of supporting and presenting African American music in the region, but the series represents a move away from presenting arts events in an institutional context. Indeed, that it is not buoyed to the budgetary exigencies and infrastructural support of an institution is one of the striking characteristics of Jazz Shares. Furthermore, even though a portion of its funding is raised through business shareholders (what might be considered advertising), individual shareholder memberships nevertheless provide the majority of its annual operating budget, thus avoiding pressures that might emerge in more traditional arts presenting organizations that rely more heavily on advertising revenue.

Even if Siegel is considered by some as a proponent of more experimental forms of jazz, the distinction between what is "avant-garde," "experimental," "traditional," or

“mainstream,” to list some of the contested language often used to map jazz, matters little to him as he programs each season. Instead, Siegel is interested in the broad diversity of musical approaches that have emerged throughout the history of jazz. “Style is almost immaterial,” he explains, “it’s about [the music] communicating, [and the artists] playing at a high level.” This approach diverges from marketing-driven booking practices common in jazz, which use stylistic consistency as a branding tool, and explains how diverse groups like those led by Román Díaz, Jon Irabagon, and Anna Webber, for example, can appear on the same season of Jazz Shares. “I try not to be doctrinaire,” Siegel explains when asked about his approach to booking artists, asserting instead that he is “more interested in hiring people whose critical reputations exceed their place in the public eye.”¹⁰

The Connecticut River Valley of western Massachusetts enjoys an abundance of opportunities to hear world-class jazz in concert. Jazz Shares is one of a number of local jazz presenting organizations and events that include the Fine Arts Center at UMass; the Music at Amherst series at Amherst College; Northampton-based Laudable Productions, which produces concerts at its venue Bombyx Center for Arts & Equity and elsewhere; the Northampton Jazz Workshop; the Northampton Jazz Festival; and the Vermont Jazz Center in nearby Brattleboro, Vermont. Rarely featuring artists that perform at these other venues, Jazz Shares aims to fill “a niche that other people in the area aren’t filling.”¹¹ This is reflected in the networks of venues, presenting organizations, and festivals whose choice of artists overlap with Jazz Shares. Siegel considers his presenting cohort to include, for example, the Jazz Gallery, Roulette, the Stone, and Arts for Art in New York City; the Bop Shop in Rochester, New York; Firehouse 12 in New Haven, Connecticut; Ars Nova in Philadelphia; City of Asylum in Pittsburgh; and Rhizome in Washington, DC. He also cites connections with New York City festivals Vision Festival and Winter Jazz Fest as well as record labels like Pi Recordings, Clean Feed, Eremite, Tzadik, and Intakt, to name a few.¹²

When asked about the future of Jazz Shares, Siegel cites sustainability challenges that likely concern most jazz presenters. In Siegel’s estimation, most Jazz Shares listeners are in their sixties (or older), a characteristic he considers common to jazz audiences writ large, thus revealing an urgency to recruit younger audiences. The energy and planning behind the series—carried out by the current board of directors and other volunteers—will also eventually need new volunteers and leadership, and the inevitable uncertainties around annual shareholder renewals creates an ongoing need to recruit new possible shareholders.

Despite these concerns, through its first ten seasons, Jazz Shares has proven that it is a sustainable model for alternative, community-based arts presenting. Of course, specific histories of CSA programs, African American music, and arts presenting

organizations in western Massachusetts coalesce into a diverse cultural context from which an ambitious idea like Jazz Shares grows from seed to harvest. One hopes that such a model would serve to inspire other collaborative community-based jazz organizations across the United States and around the world.

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Notes

1. See "Previous Events," Jazz Shares, accessed March 22, 2022, http://jazzshares.org/?page_id=175.
2. Glenn Siegel, "+ 1, Guest Contributor, Glenn Siegel, May 2016," *Food For Thought*, Rova: Arts, Rova Saxophone Quartet, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.rova.org/foodforthought/glenn-siegel-2016-may.html>.
3. Cynthia Abbott Cone and Andrea Myhre, "Community-Supported Agriculture: A Sustainable Alternative to Industrial Agriculture?," *Human Organization* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 187.
4. "About Jazz Shares," Pioneer Valley Jazz Shares, accessed March 17, 2022, http://jazzshares.org/?page_id=166.
5. Glenn Siegel, email to author, February 28, 2022. The author is a member of the board of directors.
6. Siegel is quick to note that \$1,000 is a "modest" artist fee and that it prevents Jazz Shares from presenting events with greater needs. Siegel had originally thought that this limited fee would help touring groups fill off nights in their schedule rather than serve as an "anchor gig" of a tour or as a single concert not part of a tour. This has not proven to be the case. Instead, Jazz Shares is frequently approached by artists regardless of their tour schedule. Furthermore, Siegel estimates that three-quarters of the concerts result from artists contacting him with an idea rather than him first reaching out to an artist. Glenn Siegel, phone interview with author, March 18, 2022.
7. "Views on Black American Music Black Musicians Festival: Themes Through the Years," Fine Arts Center, Spotlight Online, November/December 2000, accessed March 17, 2022, <https://www.umass.edu/fac/spotlight/8.110.html>.
8. Siegel adopted this name from a 1979 album of the same name by Don Pullen, Joseph Jarman, and Don Moye on the Italian Black Saint label. Glenn Siegel, phone interview with author, March 18, 2022.
9. In a March 22, 2022, promotional email about the concert from the Fine Arts Center, Magic Triangle is celebrated for how it

has presented improvised music across a broad range of styles and traditions in intimate venues at an affordable price over the past three decades. Founded and curated by Glenn Siegel until his recent retirement from UMass, Magic Triangle has presented artists at all stages of their careers and provided a stage for some of the most celebrated musicians in jazz history, including Andrew Hill, Lester Bowie, Sam Rivers, Milford Graves, Yusef Lateef, Roscoe Mitchell, Von Freeman, Anthony Braxton, Cecil Taylor, Randy Weston, Vijay Iyer, Mary Halvorson, Amir ElSaffar, Joshua Abrams, Rudresh Mahanthappa and Tyshawn Sorey.
10. Siegel, phone interview with author, March 18, 2022.
11. Siegel, phone interview with author, March 18, 2022.
12. Siegel, email to author, February 28, 2022.