

# MUSIC: SEAN MASON QUARTET SWINGS AT THE SIDE DOOR JAZZ CLUB

The rising jazz star Sean Mason is a serious (and seriously entertaining) talent.



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[Sean Mason Quartet](#) on March 14, 2025 \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

[Side Door Jazz Club](#) at the [Old Lyme Inn](#), Lyme CT

## THE ARTIST AND THE CONCERT

Everything you want to hear from a new talent was on display by the [Sean Mason Quartet](#) Friday night at the [Side Door jazz club](#). The music they've already recorded? It's stretched out and stronger in performance. New tunes for an upcoming album? You want to hear them again, soon. A standard to demonstrate their chops? "On The Sunny Side of The Street" with lyrics by Dorothy Fields and music by Jimmy McHugh (or perhaps Fats Waller) checked that box as well. As my introduction to Sean Mason in concert and the Side Door as a venue, this concert was ideal.


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Sean Mason wasn't on my radar before this show. I didn't hear a lot of new jazz in 2024, I realize. I've been working my way through jazz classics given the highest rating by the [Penguin Guide To Jazz](#), not to mention a deep dive into ambient and my usual diet of pop, rock, r&b, folk, blues and the like. Which sheepishly explains why my list of the [best music of 2024](#) includes just one pure jazz album: McCoy Tyner & Joe Henderson's *Forces of Nature: Live at Slugs*.

Missing on my annual roundup? Sean Mason's first Grammy-nominated album. Titled *My Ideal*, it's a piano and vocal collaboration with [singer Catherine Russell](#). When a friend said he wanted to hear some live music, Sean Mason's gig was an option so I started to explore his work. *My Ideal*? It's excellent, a wonderful work (my favorite of Russell's so far) with she and Mason in deep sympathy. Not many pianists can provide strong accompaniment to a singer *and* lead convincingly on their own. Mason can. I've

added *My Ideal* to my list of [the best albums of 2024 found on my best of all time list](#), a record of my favorite music for every year from 1924 to the present.

Catherine Russell, Sean Mason - My Ideal (





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But *My Ideal* is just one of two albums he released in 2024. The other is *Chrome Valley*, a collaboration with Jazz at Lincoln Center's first poet in residence, [Mahogany L. Browne](#). A writer with a serious body of work behind her, Browne has been a driving force for many years at the spoken word capital of the world, the [Nuyorican Poets Café](#). Their album draws from her 2023 collection of the same name, combining spoken word passages underscored by Mason with full-bodied arrangements for poems turned into song.

And back in 2023, Sean Mason Quartet released its first album, *The Southern Suite*, an ambitious work that offers serious intent without sacrificing melodies that swing. Heady, but always ready to keep bodies swaying and toes tapping.

This just scratches the surface of his work so far, since Mason has been doing his homework by soaking up experiences, enjoying the mentorship of both Branford and Wynton Marsalis and pretty much tackling any opportunity he can. Mason toured as part of a jazz tribute to the songs of Disney. (As producer/impresario Hal Willner proved with the tribute album *Stay Awake*, those songs are a rich body of work.) He played on the soundtrack for the HBO film *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, an assignment that included Branford's request that Mason purge himself of any influences beyond the 1920s for his playing of the score. Mason toured with Catherine Russell as part of

her band before they recorded as a duo. He's even played in the pit (I think!) on Broadway shows like *Hadestown* and *Phantom of the Opera*.

Mason's desire to soak up experience pays off in concert. He's onstage with musicians he mostly befriended at Juilliard and their pleasure in each other's company is winning. All eyes are on Mason for their cues, their turn at bat. And their joy in performing is clear, from the loopy grin on the face of [bassist Felix Moseholm](#) to the intense concentration of [drummer Domo Branch](#) and the mock frustration of [trumpeter Tony Glausi](#), who has fun pretending an occasional look of consternation when Mason delivers an especially knotty bit of playing or isn't quite ready to let Tony back into the number. (All three of them have substantial bodies of work you can explore on their websites.)

The opener "One United" set the tone, taking the centerpiece of their debut album *Southern Suite* and stretching it out to twice its 10+min length. Throughout, the musicians toy and tease with each other, sharing musical ideas, venturing into new territory and essentially having a blast. When Moseholm wanders into a cul de sac and finds himself trapped at one point in the show, the others laugh good-naturedly and then nod encouragement as the bassist works his way back out again. Here's the band on "Closure," also from *The Southern Suite* but not a number they did on Friday.

Sean Mason – CLOSURE (From "The Southern Suite")



Other tunes like "Secrets" and another from their upcoming album whose title escaped me were just as compelling. Mason joked they didn't play anything less than

30 minutes, yet the intense focus and creative inspiration needed to maintain one song for 30 minutes in concert is easily within their grasp.

Their sound ranged from the probing rigor of 1950s Miles Davis to the raucous rush of a sweaty club in New Orleans. Mason had the authoritative, dignified reserve of Wynton when addressing the audience and the showmanship of Branford when at the piano. He bounced and swung and immersed himself in the melodies, just as happy to dig into a soulful groove as to improvise on a discordant riff that caught his fancy. My guest was especially wowed by Mason's facility, how he'd tinkle the ivories way up at one end of the piano with his right hand while striding through a complex counterpoint with the left. Flashy? Showy? Sure, but always in service of the tune.

It all came together on the finale, that 1930 stalwart "On The Sunny Side Of The Street." Perhaps this was the tune they workshopped that afternoon and then performed for the first time that Friday, a jazz tradition Mason proudly continues of always learning new pieces from the songbook. If so, other audiences are cheated not to hear it too. They broke the tune down, swung it hard and then built it back up again without ever losing the infectious melody and rhythm that's made it a favorite of jazz greats ever since. It's very, very early days, but Mason is working towards perhaps joining them. How often do you see a new act and think, "Wow, they are the real deal"? Not often.

[Sean Mason is on tour](#) and his next three gigs encapsulate the journey he's on and the versatility of his playing. On March 29, he's performing with Catherine Russell at the Savannah Music Festival, offering a live performance of their excellent album. On April 11, the Sean Mason Quartet has a date at the University of Iowa in Iowa City. (Tickets are just \$20 for adults and \$10 for students and youth, which is a serious bargain.) And on April 19, Mason solos on piano at the Vermont Jazz Center in Brattleboro.

## THE VENUE

This was my first time at the [Side Door jazz club](#). It looks like a venue that proved a welcome afterthought to the [Old Lyme Inn](#). But in fact, it's co-owner told me (unawares I was reviewing the show) that in fact her husband really, really wanted a jazz club. (Indeed he was an exuberant master of ceremonies when introducing the band, which gigged there even before their debut album came out.) So when they bought the property, she said, "I guess we're in the inn business now, too." The concert space is essentially a long narrow rectangle, with seating stretching out in

front of the stage on both sides, with a few extra seats a little deeper at the center. You'd be hard pressed to find a bad seat, even if the place was full.

We sat at the bar which is stage right and enjoyed an excellent view over Mason's shoulder, with a direct line of sight to the rest of the band and their laser focus on the pianist. Side Door certainly isn't a big venue so if you're really set on observing a particular musician, arriving half an hour early is advisable. Also, one bartender is working hard to serve everyone; so that's another reason not to show up a few minutes before the set and feel annoyed when your drink takes a while to arrive.

We also ate at the [Old Lyme Inn](#), which was an upscale but not wildly expensive evening out. They recommended anyone going to a show at 8 pm should book their dinner for 6 pm. That makes sense if you plan to linger, enjoy a drink before dinner and coffee and/or dessert afterwards. If, like us, you're simply there to dine and dash, 6:30 proved perfectly fine for getting to the club at 7:40, easily. However, they strongly urge you to book two hours before the show or they don't guarantee you'll be done in time, so what do I know?

[Up next at Side Door?](#) Grammy winning New Orleans trumpeter (and multi-instrumentalist) [Nicholas Payton](#) plays on March 22 and March 23.

*Tickets were provided by the venue with the understanding a timely review would be written. Dinner, however, was on my guest. Thanks, TJ!*

### [THEATER CONCERTS I'VE ATTENDED IN 2025](#)

1. A Guide For The Homesick \*\* out of \*\*\*\*
2. [Still \(w Melissa Gilbert at Sheen\)](#) \*\*
3. [A Streetcar Named Desire \(Paul Mescal at BAM\)](#) \*\*
4. Sean Mason Quartet at Side Door Jazz Club in Old Lyme, CT \*\*\* 1/2

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