

# Jazzing it up on First Street



From left, Pete Bridgewater, Don Heller, Jeff Helgeson and Kevin Kaiser play at Buddie's.

**By Joe Millas**  
**I**t's a cold night and First Street is nearly deserted. There are only two cars parked along the curb on the east side of the street and nobody is out walking in the chilly wind as owner Clarence Davidson opens the front door and three musicians haul their instruments into Buddie's.

As Unit 3, a jazz trio, sets up near the front door, a couple enters the bar and finds a place to sit. They are soon joined by two more couples as they wait for the musicians to begin their first set.

The trio — Alan Bates, Bill French and John Pennell — will play until 10 p.m. They've been doing it every Thursday night at Buddie's, 100 N. First St., for the past two months.

The presence of the band and the people who have come to hear the music is a sign that the First Street music scene, dormant during most of the 1980s, may be starting to make a comeback. Central to the resurgence are Davidson, Gerald "Candy" Foster (owner of Candy's Lounge) and veteran local jazz performer Pete Bridgewater.

"It's a real nice scene," said Bates of Buddie's. "It's a comfortable club. You get a nice mix of people. It reminds me of a big city club with people of all races coming in."

Bates should know. A Champaign-Urbana native, Bates worked as a professional musician in New York for 13 years before taking a job in the Virgin Islands in 1989.

When Unit 3 starts to play, at about 7:30, there are eight or nine people in the place. All of them, except Davidson, are white. Soon more people, black and white, start drifting in. They listen to Bates on the

vibes and steel pan (drum). Pennell on stand-up bass and French on drums as they play tunes like "Sweet and Lovely," "The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia," "Ricardo Bossa Nova" and "Sweet Georgia Brown."

The customers start ordering drinks and Davidson handles most of the orders himself. Soon everyone is getting into the mood created by the jazz beat of Unit 3. They applaud every solo and at the end of every number.

Before the band finishes its first set, Buddie's is hopping. About 40 people (capacity is 45) are listening to the music, buying drinks and having a good time.

Candy's Lounge is located one block north of Buddie's, at 201 N. First St. There's no live music there most week nights, but on Saturdays you can catch local and out-of-town bands performing. Lounge manager Mary Clark, a top-notch singer, also headlines and even Foster, who's been singing professionally for over 25 years, will do a set or two once in a while.

"My main night (for live music) is Saturday," said Foster, who has been operating Candy's since July. "Sometimes I throw in a late Friday. I'm trying to stay in harmony with what Buddie's is doing. They don't have live bands on Saturday, so that's when I do mine."

Davidson, who has owned Buddie's for 11 years, said this is not the first time he's tried live music.

"This is sort of a second shot at it," he said. "I tried jazz a couple years ago, but we had them (the musicians) play from 9 o'clock until one in the morning and that was too late for a lot of people who like jazz."

But it was more than just the time of day,

said Davidson. It was also First Street's reputation as one of Champaign-Urbana's toughest areas which made it tough to attract crowds.

"Back in the early '70s, with the gang banging, that's the thing that has been the most detrimental," said Davidson. "When you add to that the other bad events that have happened around here, the killings at the Golden Road (a night spot formerly located on First Street), that hasn't helped."

Foster said it isn't just a problem of getting white people to come to First Street. "It's been just as hard to get some of the older black people," he said. "They had the same fears as white people did."

But Davidson believes the area no longer deserves its bad reputation and he's turned to jazz to do something about it. When music didn't work the first time, he didn't give up. He started having Bridgewater, who's been playing jazz for over a half century, and his quintet play on Friday and Sunday evenings. Only this time the band played from 5 until 9 p.m.

"We started it back when it would still be tight at nine," said Bridgewater. "That way people who were worried about being there after dark would not have to worry about it so much."

"We're getting an awful lot of people in town who have never been to First Street before. Nobody messes with anybody. You're always going to have that one guy, but they make sure he's out of the place as fast as they find him."

It happened just that way on that cold night at Buddie's. A man who had had a little too much of something stumbled toward the front of the place and fell to the floor in front of the band. The band never missed a beat and, as soon as Davidson found out about it, he led the man quietly out the door.

Foster said he's had little or no trouble in his place.

"People who see a potential problem come to me or see that it doesn't happen," he said. "I hope that continues. I've been open since July and there hasn't been hardly anything happen in my place. It's been pretty much an over-20 crowd and that's what I wanted when I opened."

Foster also credits Bridgewater and Davidson for helping people get to know about his place.

"When they come into Buddie's, Pete will say 'This is not the only place here (on First Street) you can come into for music. There's another place down the way called Candy's and he has bands there on Saturday night.'"

Davidson said he's pleased with the results of his latest try with live music.

"It's not it's working," he said. "We're getting good crowds here. As long as folks can walk in here



Candy's owner schedules music so as not to interfere with that of Buddie's.

## Future up in air at 'Folding Table'

The music scene on First Street may be getting back in gear, but at Nature's Table things are slowly moving toward an inevitable conclusion.

Owners Terry and Shelley Masar know the wrecking ball will bring down the restaurant/club, located at 300 S. Goodwin Ave., in, sometime in late May.

"It is happening," said Shelley Masar. "We call it the 'Folding Table' now because it's going to happen."

Don Wendel, University of Illinois vice chancellor for administrative affairs, said the building housing Nature's Table would be razed late in the spring, although a specific date has not yet been determined.

"It's a scheduling issue related to the needs of people in other buildings and how far along the plans are for the new Chemical Life Sciences Building (which will occupy the space)," Wendel said.

What the Masars don't know is what will happen after the building is razed.

"The university has said they're considering starting an enterprise zone, but they haven't said much more than that," said Terry Masar. "If they did that, we might be able to find a place we could afford to continue Nature's Table."

Wendel said the university and the city or Urbana are discussing the possibility of establishing some type of area for businesses on the east side of campus, but that talks are only exploratory.

Shelley Masar said Nature's Table's needs to remain in business were minimal.

"All we need to continue is an inexpensive space on campus. They (the university) could call it an ongoing cultural event and we could sell beer and wine."

"We're a campus business. Students play music there and come back to play after they graduate. There's lots of music in town. It (Champaign-Urbana) doesn't need Nature's Table to survive, but Nature's Table has helped the music scene a lot. It's brought lots of musicians to play where

students can come and hear them."

"We need that on this campus. We need little places to go and hang out."

The Masars said the resurgence of music on First Street is not spurning of musicians from Nature's Table.

"The more places that have jazz the better," said Terry Masar. "It's exciting to see what's happening at Buddie's and the Blind Pig will probably have jazz acts sometime soon."

Terry Masar said the music at Nature's Table has never generated significant revenues, but he always felt the music should be there, because people wanted it and enjoyed it.

"Some nights the jazz holds its own (financially) and some nights we get six or seven people," he said. "It's been the restaurant that allows the music to happen, so we've never been dependent on what money the music produced." □

JOE MILLAS



Unit 3 — Alan Bates, left, John Pennell, center, and Bill French — plays at Buddie's.

Please turn to page 7

"We're getting an awful lot of people in town who have never been to First Street before. Nobody messes with anybody. You're always going to have that one guy, but they make sure he's out of the place as fast as they find him."