

ARTS & CULTURE

# Downtown Fort Worth jazz club hits all the notes after nearly two decades

by David Moreno  
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Singer Ricki Derek and the Vegas Six band perform a medley of classic songs at Scat Jazz Lounge in downtown Fort Worth on July 18, 2025. (David Moreno | Fort Worth Report)

The rhythmic sounds of horns, strings and percussion filled the dark room inside Scat Jazz Lounge as Dallas singer Ricki Derek led the Vegas Six band through a rendition of “Blue Moon” by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart.

The song's mellow lyrics and saxophone solo conveyed a yearning for love. The audience, illuminated only by candle light, listened closely.

The song came to an end, and the room erupted in cheers.

For Cary Ray, co-owner of Scat Jazz Lounge, the intimate setting has been key to what has made his downtown Fort Worth club a staple for nearly 20 years.

"It's all about watching these amazing musicians showcase their talents," he said. "We have every age group and ethnic group present, so everybody enjoys this great music together."

### **'Romantic idea' of a jazz club**



Singer Ricki Derek performs in front of an audience at Scat Jazz Lounge July 18, 2025. (David Moreno | Fort Worth Report)

The vision for Scat Jazz Lounge started in 2004 when Ray, who had a history of operating nightclubs in Dallas, was offered a basement space from Sundance Square management for a new musical concept between Worthington Bank and the Caravan of Dreams Gallery.

Downtown district leaders wanted to create a synergy in the heart of the city by adding a new venue, Ray said, and a place for the “martini crowd” was missing. A jazz club inspired by the intimate New York City lounges seemed like the right fit, he added.



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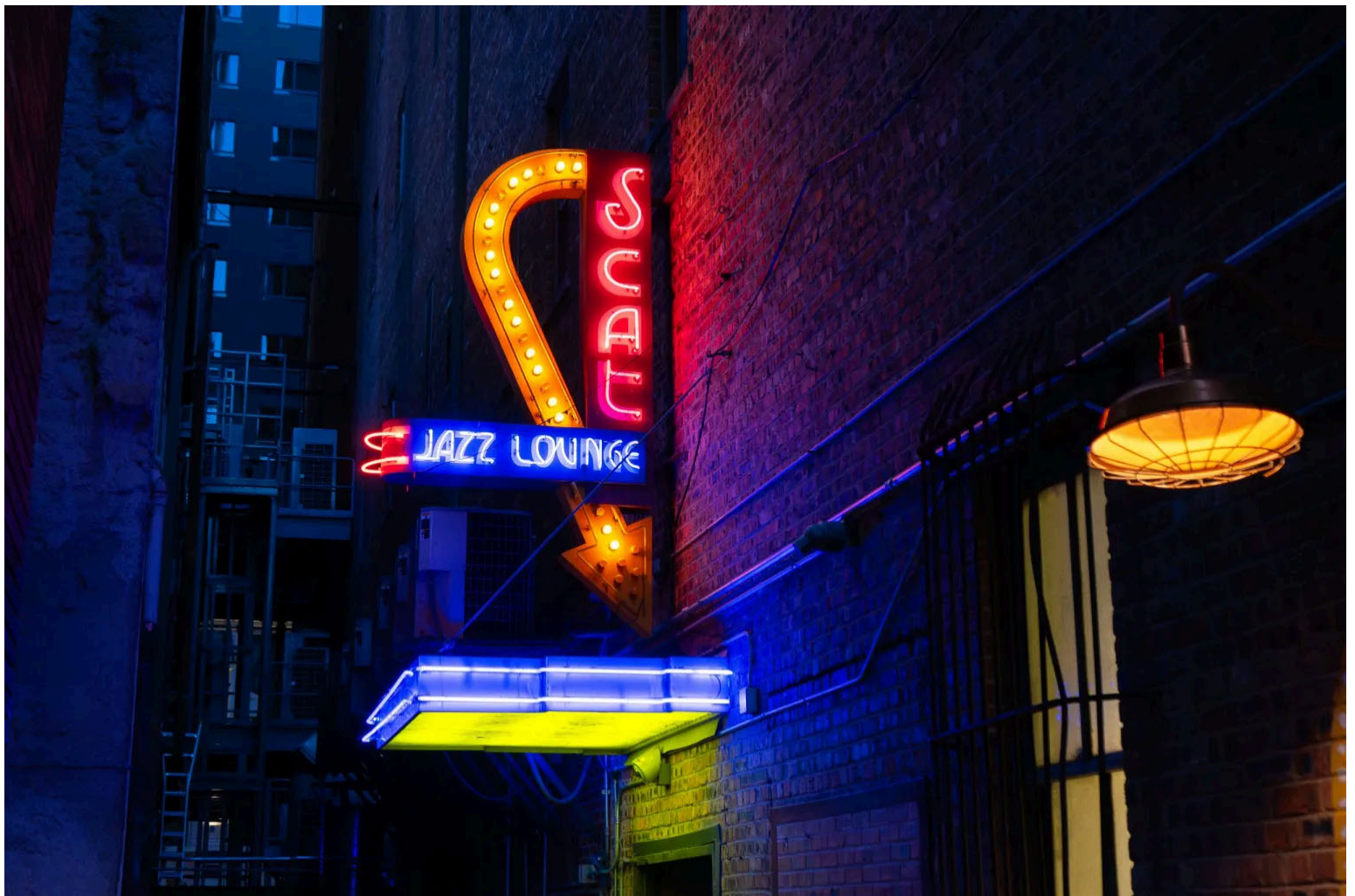
Wanting to incorporate the artistic vision of a jazz musician, Ray recruited Ricki Derek and entrepreneur Neil Connell, who had operated a nightclub, to make the lounge a reality.

Scat Jazz Lounge, conceived as a 1950s-style space, **played its first tune** in December 2007.

“It was the romantic idea of what a jazz club is in your mind or in a movie,” Derek said.

The club found immediate success as it focused on fostering local talent and creating a vibrant atmosphere rather than attracting only more well-known jazz musicians. Its iconic neon sign cultivated street appeal to anyone who passed as it illuminated the dark alleyway on West 4th Street.

People were able to come and go and stand or sit in front of the stage.



The Scat Jazz Lounge neon sign illuminated in a dark alleyway between Worthington Bank and Caravan of Dreams Gallery in Sundance Square. Some people only stop to snap a quick photo while others head down the flight of stairs with their curiosity piqued. (David Moreno | Fort Worth Report)

Over the years, Scat Jazz Lounge has attracted different types of audiences, Derek said, including both long-time jazz lovers and newcomers.

Club owners built up relationships with the University of North Texas College of Music, known for its jazz studies, and other Texas lounges to provide opportunities for local artists.

“We’ve set the room to be an experience for the customer because we take care of our musicians and take care of our audience,” Derek said.

The road hasn’t been completely smooth for Scat Jazz Lounge. The COVID-19 pandemic was a big hit to music venues across the country, Ray said, and the jazz lounge management had to **rethink its model**.

Rather than continue down the come-and-go model, the venue reduced its capacity, put an end to the standing area in front of the stage, and required attendees to reserve seats in advance.

The revamp has been a success. Scat Jazz Lounge now makes more on tickets than on alcohol sales. The higher ticket prices make up for the smaller capacity and allows the club to pay its staff and talent more. Increasing to two shows a night also helped support the bottom line.

“We’ve never had a problem getting people in here, but I don’t know how many hundreds of places have failed in the time that we’ve been open because it’s not easy,” Derek said.

## Staying sharp for the future



The trumpet player for the Vegas Six performs a solo during a sold-out show at Scat Jazz Lounge July 18, 2025. (David Moreno | Fort Worth Report)

As Scat Jazz Lounge prepares for its 20th anniversary in 2027, the club's management remains optimistic about its future despite [external concerns about the state of Sundance Square](#).

Sundance Square has faced controversy in the past five years as more than 30 restaurants and shops moved out of the privately owned downtown district, sparking conversations about the [vitality of the area](#).

“We can only really control what goes on inside these four walls here, and that’s what we try to control and have an impact on,” Ray said. “If we stay in this space for many more years or whether we have to transition to another space downtown, I still think that the mission will carry us through.”

Scat Jazz Lounge operators remain focused on ensuring that every person who walks through the doors departs an even bigger fan of jazz than they were before.

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