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Blackhawk Quintet bring West Coast cool to Epsom

7 November 2025

For an increasing number of informed regulars, Epsom Jazz Club has become a nearby haven of quality music attracting national and international talent down to our own corner of Surrey.

For those not yet in the know, it's worth broaching the growing roster of world-class musicians and singers who've walked through the doors at the Comrades Club venue.

It includes Tony Kofi, who blew his sax at Glastonbury this year in the long-running jazz funk outfit Cymande's latest incarnation, trumpeter Andy Davies who with local guitar star Nigel Price brought along the rest of the amazing Ronnie Scott's house band (EJC also has jazz lamps on the tables), and Alan Barnes – for whom the cliché 'luminary' is, in his case, actually warranted.

Past line-ups of award-winning players also include Hannah Horton, Allison Neale, Emma Rawicz, Karen Sharp and, in a genre that may be said to err sometimes on the side of seniority, the club has carefully promoted some up-and-coming artists, with exciting young vocalists on the bill like Ineza and Annie Majin.

Backdrop set, it is celebrated drummer Matt Skelton breaking new ground in October bringing his Blackhawk Quintet to Epsom – it's been strictly quartets on the Comrades' small stage to date – for an evening exploring the work of fellow sticksman Shelly Manne. The show focused on an intense week in the life and career of this West Coast "cool" jazz innovator, band leader, club owner and movie music composer, who in the 1950s and 60s was often pictured nattily dressed at his drums, in jacket and tie, a big smile on his face.

This five-piece is named (deliberately portmanteau, it seems) after a short residency of concerts at San Francisco's Black Hawk club in the autumn of 1959, recorded with a view to releasing a single live album that became a series of four scintillating records, such was the quantity of quality material, followed by a fifth album in the early 1990s when the whole lot was re-released on CD.

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Skelton's men for the evening were Leon Greening – perhaps my favourite jazz pianist working in the country right now – Mark Crooks, whose tenor sax croons, glides and purrs like Lester Young, Stan Getz or indeed Manne's tenorman on the Black Hawk records Richie Kamuca; hard-swinging young horn player Jim Davison (once lead trumpet in the National Youth Jazz Orchestra, now leading his own bands and scooping awards); and Jeremy Brown, one of the go-to bassists on the UK scene who's played at Epsom at least half a dozen times in various line-ups.

It's a rare treat to hear five musicians on this stage, with two brass-blowing front men. The sound is full and punchy, hitting right to the fore during the energetic thematic heads, and adding that extra bit of variety as the players take their solo turns.

The band took the vocally enthusiastic crowd on a fabulous journey through the recorded sessions, from the mid-tempo bopper *Pullin' Strings* to the smoothly striding *Eclipse of Spain*, via the hard bop of Benny Golson composition *Step Lightly.*

The night's focus on the short series of Black Hawk gigs – with occasional forays into other Shelly Manne albums (the grooving, Latin-tinged *The Breeze and I* from *Boss Sounds!*) or pieces by his various collaborators including Henry Mancini (the exquisite ballad *Dreamsville*) – provided a satisfying coherence to the concert you don't always get.

That satisfaction only deepened with the scholarly asides, stories and nuggets of background about Manne, the gigs and the man's musical life that Skelton amused us with between numbers.

Oh, and did I mention the drums? Skelton beats them hands down.

Amanda Gregory

Epsom Jazz Club puts on concerts at the Comrades Club, 1 The Parade, Epsom KT18 5BT. The next evening will feature violinist Matt Holborn and his quartet on 27 November, starting 7:30 pm.

Photo by Steven McCormick of Steven McCormick Photography

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