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## COVER STORY.

# Close for Comfort

Salon culture is on the rise as local art lovers make a case for intimacy.

by **A.D. Amorosi**

Published: Sep 16, 2009



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Mark Stehle

Andrea Clearfield

What's the difference between your standard-issue rock show or open mic and a salon?

For starters, nobody ever offered me a free freshly baked oatmeal cookie at the First Unitarian Church.

For that kind of treat, you'll have to stop by pianist Andrea Clearfield's home in Center City or another of the increasingly popular salons that are popping up around town. Simply put, salons are cozy gatherings, often in the living room of a charismatic host, where music, poetry and ideas flow like wine.

Way in front of the trend — or behind it, if you count those 17th-century Parisians — Clearfield's been using her home as a live event venue for 23 years. "It's great that these salons are happening in response to the growing need for alternative, intimate and non-commercial spaces to experience artistic expression," she says. "Many of the performers tell me that one of the things they appreciate most is that the audience is truly listening — and the performers, especially jazz and folk artists who might otherwise play in noisy clubs — love the chance to be really heard."

This kind of audience-performer bond helps to build a real sense of community around the arts. But who in their right mind would let their rugs get worn and their walls get smeared all in the name of intimacy, creativity and communal vibes?

Andrea Clearfield

It's dusk on a Sunday in May with the sun just beginning to shift when a crowd gathers around the doorway of Andrea Clearfield's large tan-colored house in Center City (Clearfield asks that we not give the address for privacy's sake). Upon entry, each attendee takes off his or her shoes and climbs the long, winding staircase lined with photos, drawings and such. On each ascending step, you'll hear a member of the crowd chat with enthusiasm about what they'll find when they hit the last stair. Some seem to know exactly who'll play that night — Philly scat singer Paul Jost performing songs by McCoy Tyner and Duke Ellington, for instance — but most attendees don't care who exactly is playing.

They trust that Clearfield — a composer, performer and Relâche member who's taught composition and interdisciplinary performance art at the University of the Arts since 1986, the year she started her salon — will curate the most elegant, enigmatic and diverse of programs. She and her team (Jennifer Kopp Lewis, Manfred Fischbeck, recording technician Gene Orlando) make everything look and sound great while ensuring that everyone is comfortable, either in the stage-level seating area or the second balcony reserved for overflow seating. ADVERTISEMENT

She'll need it.

Though Clearfield's salon aesthetic is mostly based on living, modern composers and new classical music, all styles are welcome here. This evening, Philly songwriter Ben Arnold makes his first salon appearance. The diversity, open-mindedness and enthusiasm of the performers can be witnessed, too, in Clearfield's audience. "They give equal attention to a Latin band, an edgy atonal chamber work, an electronic soundscape, an opera scene or a Butoh dance," she says. As the sun streams through the tall windows of the 25-foot-high room, the audience continues to fill Clearfield's space until the show commences. She's calculated that, as of this evening, approximately 200 salons featuring more than 5,000 performers and more than 15,000 audience members have come through her living room.

James Reilly

The measurements and light infiltration isn't quite the same at James Reilly's old stone mansion where 60 can be seated comfortably — and have been since Reilly and his wife, Suyun, started up The Psalm in 2004 with more than 80 performances a year. "The thick stone exterior and plaster on the lath interior walls contribute to the audiophile-quality sound system," says Reilly, who finds that musicians — from local singing-songwriters Phil Roy and Birdie Busch to traditional Siberian throat singers and gypsy jazz guitarist Stephane Wrembel — tend to raise their eyebrows when they play their first note. "It enhances the overall quality of an evening performance when musicians and audiences feel enveloped in what has been described as 'a bubble of sound.'" While the darkened Psalm encompasses a living room and foyer for performance and a kitchen where attendees gather during intermission to meet artists and enjoy free refreshments, the loftiness that often fills Clearfield's high-minded events is, at the Psalm, dedicated more toward the gently spiritual. The acronym PSALM (Philadelphia Society for Art, Literature and Music) is derived from the wisdom of Old Testament prophet David, who used poetry and song in worship of the divine, thus uniting the warring tribes of the region in peace. "PSALM is not a religious organization in any way, but does ascribe a higher universal nature to man that may be awakened and developed through seeking intrinsic beauty in all its manifestations," says Reilly.

Jacqui Cunliffe

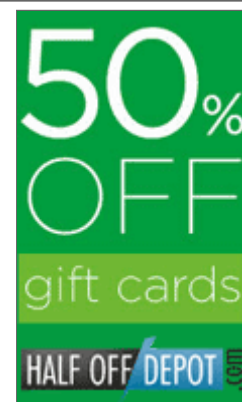
Though her vocation is psychology (psychodynamic psychotherapy, more specifically), Jacqui Cunliffe's salons have supported all sorts of worthy causes, progressive political candidates, poetry and, last but not least, music.

Not all salons are devoted to music or prose. Most recently, Cunliffe hosted a magic show benefit for the prevention and treatment of eating disorders.

Since 2004, not on an organized monthly schedule but motivated by whim and the availability of friends and performers, Cunliffe's salons in her Strafford home are more relaxed. "You will often find people in the kitchen helping to get out the food," says Cunliffe, whose salon space encompasses her living room, dining room, hall and breakfast room, the latter of which becomes the "green room" for the likes of John Francis, Jim Boggia and her brother's jazzy duo Flutar. "As long as there are interesting artists or worthy causes, I could be persuaded into continuing the salon," says Cunliffe whose debut event/fundraiser raised more than \$2,200 for Oxfam's aid to Darfur.

Erin Anderson

Erin Anderson — one-half of the synth duo Flowchart and a hairdresser — is about community, as well. "The very nature of a hair salon is community," she says about a place where people come for hours to chat, sit quietly, relax and read while getting their hair done by people they trust. "This truth is the catalyst for why I wanted to embellish my



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space into one where local artists, artisans and, ideally, the clients themselves showcase their work," says Anderson. Every two months for the last three years, Fringe beauty salon (formerly Ruth Daneman Salon) switches out paintings from locals (Andrew Jeffery Wright, Damian Wienkrantz, Abi Galloza) and commemorates the event with an opening party that features all manner of celebration — in the form of music, improv or fashion. Fringe has shown everything from traditional oil paintings to portraits made out of hair, and featured musicians doing everything from minimal techno to Celtic music.

Anderson's goal: to use her beauty salon space as an art showcase — because the business of art is something she doesn't dig. "Ideally the best art exists outside of the confines of money — when you add money to the quotient, things become compromised," says Anderson. "So, the art is for sale, just not at exorbitant prices, as part of the experience of coming to Fringe Salon."



Megan Bridge and Peter Price

The newest of the salon enterprisers — dancer Megan Bridge and digital artist Peter Price — began fidget> in June 2008 as part of their intention for renting 4,700 square feet of space in a 19th-century factory building. The pair wanted to use it for domesticity and art-making, for their own brand of "cybernetic, psychedelic, concept- and image-driven multimedia dance theater" and works by other artists they either knew or wanted to know. "We don't consider ourselves as presenters but more as facilitators," says Bridge who, since this June, has held events with fellow choreographers (Kate Watson-Wallace), dance troupes (Pink Hair Affair) and musicians (El Malito), as well as creating an "Artists in Residence" series with performance artist Mauri Walton, singer Bonnie Lander and choreographer Daniele Strawmyre.

"We wanted to make a change in the way we create and share work with our audiences," says Bridge. "We want to take back performance and make it more a part of our artistic practice and our daily life. We want audiences to engage in our process of finding and developing the work, not just see a glitzy product under bright lights in a dark theater that is ultimately alienating."



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Andrea Clearfield's [The Salon, andreaclearfield.com](http://TheSalon.andreaclearfield.com) • James Reilly's [Psalm, psalmsalon.com](http://Psalm_psalmsalon.com) • Erin Anderson's [Fringe Salon, fringesalononline.com](http://FringeSalonOnline.com) • Jacqui Cunliffe's [Chez Jacqui, j1\\_cunliffe@yahoo.com](http://ChezJacqui.j1_cunliffe@yahoo.com) • Megan Bridge and Peter Price's [, thefidget.org](http://thefidget.org).

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