

The Bottom Line of Jazz in Korea

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Fig 1: Jazz pianist in Moon Stone Band. (Photo courtesy of Kim Hyoungmin, 2025)

Fig 2: Moon Stone Band. (Photo courtesy of Moon Stone Band, 2025)

Fig 3: The owner of Bottomline, Hur Jungsun, with her vinyl collection. (Photo courtesy of Hur Jungsun, 2025)

Fig 4: The entrance of jazz venue 'Bottomline' located in the heart of old Incheon. (Photo by Jeon Seongkee, 2025)



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Bottomline is Incheon's oldest jazz venue, and it has been running for over 40 years in Shinpo area. It was a shivering winter day when I visited Shinpo, one of many neighbourhoods where one can be immersed in the scenery of late 19th-century and early 20th-century Korea amongst the concrete jungle of vertical urban communities. Starting with Chinatown, which formed in the 1880s, you can see a glimpse of the history of transnational Incheon, including architecture from China, Japan, and the West dating to the 19th century, when the area became an international port city opened to trade following the Treaty of Ganghwa (1876).

It was a short walk to Bottomline from Sinpo station. Just like many other shops and offices on this street, the jazz venue was housed in a repurposed Japanese colonial-era wooden commercial building built over 100 years ago. As I entered the venue, a hand-drawn portrait of Miles Davis on the stage wall caught my attention. While mesmerised by Bottomline's vibe, I was pleasantly surprised by hearing such passionately played live music in this old hidden corner of Incheon. Moon Stone Band took the stage. Starting with a powerful performance of "Puttin' on the Ritz" and then transitioning to a mellow tempo with "My One and Only Love," the band moved on to a jazz interpretation of Pharrell Williams' hit

song "Happy". All my doubts about jazz in my local town evaporated, and I felt pure joy and excitement.

After the performance, I chatted with Hur Jungsun, the owner of the venue for the past 30 years. She has collected thousands of vinyl records and CDs of musicians from all around the world. Hur lost count of her collection long ago, as she saw no point in memorising how many items there are. During our conversation, many customers approached her and requested their favourite songs. She simply turned around and found the song straight from her massive record collection. She didn't take time to recognise the requested songs and find them amongst the thousands of albums, no matter the song's language or where the song is from.

Hur, as a lifetime Incheoner, described herself a regular customer of Bottomline since her early 20s. In the 1980s and 1990s music venues with DJs packed the streets of Korea, and Hur was amongst the many music enthusiasts. Korea was coming out of the shadow of the anti-communist dictatorship and its military censorship, and music of that era reflected the liberalisation of Korean society and the heavy influence of American culture. In 1995, Hur took over the Bottomline music bar business from the previous owner.

The venue gradually grew throughout decades and hosted the first generation of post-dictatorship Korean jazz musicians. It also has been inviting talented musicians

from abroad, regardless of genre, such as rock bands and artists who play traditional Korean music. Bottomline used to be a mainstream club where people could enjoy music from their favourite DJs and occasional live performances, and Hur built a stage and the venue hosted gigs once a month. Gradually, the frequency of live performances increased to two or three per week. Retro culture became a big trend in late 2010s, and Hur hoped to have daily live performances like other famous venues in Seoul. During those days, the number of young audiences (i.e., 20s and early 30s) increased, occupying more than half and sometimes even 70 per cent of all seats.

However, Hur noted that jazz has fallen on hard times in Korea recently. She emphasised the difficulty of running a jazz club due to the lack of awareness of jazz music and to general economic difficulties, especially since the COVID pandemic. She has also experienced a refund request when audience's high level of expectation was not satisfied. Running a jazz venue in an environment where trends change extremely fast was never easy, especially in Korea. Sinpo had been a street of youth and culture, as the area was so prosperous that it was called Myeongdong of Incheon, a reference to one of the busiest Seoul shopping districts that many foreigners visit. Recently, the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Sinpo has gradually transformed into a nondescript commercial area driven by franchise restaurants.

Hur expressed her concerns about the future of Bottomline – namely, that the retro trend amongst young generations has come to an end with the economic downturn, and

that young consumers now tend to follow the top-selling and trendiest entertainment genres, such as K-pop or hip-hop. The prominence of these genres reflects broader global music trends, and jazz shows less popularity than even trot, which evolved from the colonial era and has seen a recent resurgence among both older and younger generations. Ironically, trot bears heavy influence from the early 1920s "jazz age" in Korea. But that is another story and shall be told another time.

The Korean government has designated Bottomline, a small 30-year-old local business, as a "100-year store", and the local government has designated it as an "Incheon Heritage Store." Therefore, the club became eligible for government financial support. However, Hur sadly stated that government support covered just enough money to change the storefront sign, and there has not been any further support yet.

I encourage people to visit Bottomline. I discovered a feast for the eyes and ears, but most of all, what left the strongest impression was meeting an individual dedicated to preserving this piece of tradition: the bottom line of jazz in Korea.

Jazz Club Bottomline can also be found on YouTube www.youtube.com/@bottomline1983 and Instagram [@jazzclubbottomline](https://www.instagram.com/jazzclubbottomline)

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