

REAL LIVE MUSIC

The T-shirts for sale in the lobby of World Café Live read "You've Never Seen Music Like This." While the paradox is meant to emphasize the perfect sight lines of Philadelphia's cutting-edge café-concert space, it also epitomizes the holistic entrepreneurial vision of its creator, Hal Real '74. "To be viable in the music business today, you have to mix in a lot of things," the affable and enthusiastic Real explains. "It's a unique model that blurs the lines between the nonprofit and for-profit worlds, but at the heart of the vision we're all about the music."

Real has mixed quite a lot of things into World Café Live: a 100-seat café, full food and beverage service, and, above all, an acoustically ideal 300-seat venue for live music.

A self-professed "entrepreneur since the age of eight," when he started a baby-sitting business, Real was a real-estate lawyer, then the founder and CEO of Data Protection, Inc., a company that provided off-site computer data security services, before assuming his current incarnation as founder and CEO of Real Entertainment Group, the parent company of World Café Live. A passion for music has underscored all of his life adventures.

"If you asked me what I was going to be when I was growing up, I would have said 'jazz pianist,'" the fifty-two-year-old native Philadelphian smiles. In fact, during his Kenyon days, Real and classmate Leon Haslip performed regularly at the Village Inn. "We played jazz standards, light rock, and pop," he recalls. In addition, Real was a member of several bands that played on and off campus, most memorably, during his senior year, one named Just Until May.

In fact, it was all of his college gigs that finally laid the dream of becoming the next Chick Corea to rest. "I decided that I wanted to keep my music for myself so I could play what I wanted to play," Real says. "I didn't want to make music my career." Instead he went to law school and in typical Real fashion threw himself into his work. Even while helping such high-profile clients as the late real estate developer Willard Rouse expand his empire, Real launched the computer data company on the side. When he sold Data Protection in 1998, twenty-five years after his father died of a heart attack, Real decided to take some time to consider what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

"I knew I wanted to chase my passion for live music," he recalls. But at the same time, Real had watched the live music scene deteriorate to the point where he knew there had to be a better way. He was fed up with the sticky floors, smoky rooms, bad sight lines, uneven sound, and delayed starts that plagued the club scene he frequented. It just so happens that while he was pondering this question, the omnipresent background music in Real's life was tuned to his favorite show, *World Café*, on his favorite station, WXPB, the University of Pennsylvania's public radio station.

Without skipping a beat, Real, who was a loyal member of WXPB, dialed then-station manager

Vinnie Curran and set up a meeting. The concept was simple: The station needed a new home and had the "grownup" audience Real wanted to reach. He proposed combining the radio station with a live performance venue that had perfect acoustics, good food, no smoke, and up-and-coming musicians. He described his concept as similar to broadcasting the *Today Show* from Rockefeller Center or *Good Morning America* in Times Square. "There are eighty million people over the age of thirty in this country and most of them love music. But they had no place to go," Real says. The vision was in place.

The realization of the vision, however, took a good seven years. The process of bringing World Café Live into existence involved the University of Pennsylvania, investors, extensive renovations to a 40,000-square-foot abandoned pipe factory at the edge of Penn's campus, a change of station managers at WXPB, two different architects (one who knew restaurant and club design, one who specialized in sound studios), reams of paperwork, and \$15 million. World Café Live, home to two state-of-the-art live music spaces as well as the spacious offices and studios of WXPB, opened to the public October 1, 2004.

So far, the jury's still out. "To a certain extent we are building the plane in flight, but we've had a tremendous impact, beyond our expectations, on the Philadelphia music scene," Real enthuses. "I am overjoyed at the diversity of our audiences, which all relates to the diversity of the music." Real says he is in "serious conversations" with other cities to replicate the model, but he won't make a commitment elsewhere for another year. "I'm in this for the long haul," he says. "It's all about balancing passion with the right measures of discipline and skill."

—Kathryn Levy Feldman

