

April 28, 2003

JAZZ REVIEW; Spectrum of Musicians Converges for Jamming

By BEN RATLIFF

Jazz these days is the sum total of various cells, operating mostly independently. This is why the overriding concern of Wynton Marsalis and Jazz at Lincoln Center -- to bring the music together into a larger and more powerful entity -- is not just a practical consolidation of assets but an impressive form of idealism.

The institution has worked to teach its audience the music's history and to pull dancing back to jazz, at least to those areas that will accommodate it. And with the first Jazz Jamboree, an event on Friday night at Avery Fisher Hall intended to be repeated in future seasons, the idea was to pick among the top bands in current jazz -- no matter how far apart the styles -- for a triple bill, and combine the principle performers for jamming.

The event featured Mr. Marsalis's septet, with Joe Lovano as guest soloist; Dave Holland's quintet; and Michael Brecker's quartet. It began with Mr. Holland's group, which has become sophisticated beyond recognition since the mid-1990's. Here is one of the pinnacles of small-group arranging, though not in a fussy way. The arranging is almost antifussy, given the perseverance of its ostinatos and its funky cycling grooves. But as he did in "Juggler's Parade," played on Friday, Mr. Holland incorporates short bridge sections stuffed with chords, only to return to the single-chord groove.

Those grooves are subtle, and they keep changing. For much of the set -- with Mr. Holland on bass, Steve Nelson on vibraphone and Billy Kilson on drums -- none of the musicians articulated the beat, yet it was there, implied with absolute clarity. And the group got plenty of mileage out of simple alterations. Improvised counterpoint is probably the best kind, and what these players could do, repeatedly, in various combinations -- including Robin Eubanks on trombone and Chris Potter on saxophones and clarinet -- was among the most impressive I have heard in years.

The set was capped by "Happy Jamming," a piece for octet (Mr. Marsalis, Mr. Lovano and Mr. Brecker took part) written for the occasion by Mr. Holland. When the horn players took their turns soloing, Mr. Potter, on soprano saxophone, demolished the competition with dense, energetic blowing over the full range of the horn. Remember, this band is a self-contained world, and Mr. Potter has been in it for five years, learning the twists and turns.

The first half of Mr. Brecker's set was a lull, only because it seemed so rigid: Mr. Brecker on tenor saxophone and Adam Rogers on guitar played long, hard-nosed strings of short notes. But then Mr. Brecker played a solo interpretation of Thelonious Monk's "Monk's Mood," a piece full of dense harmony, and a challenge for a monophonic instrument. But he used the echo of the hall to create harmony, and paced himself well.

Finally Mr. Marsalis came on to play a tune grounded in driving quarter-note swing. In their back-to-back solos, Mr. Brecker roared through a jagged language of harmonic substitutions, while Mr. Marsalis sounded chary and less comfortable.

Mr. Marsalis closed with his septet, which played a handful of his own pieces brilliantly, including the noirish, simmering "Majesty of the Blues." He saved his best playing for the simplest piece of the night, an improvised blues. He laid back, and then his playing surged in hard glissandos; he took his time to develop a narrative.

Mr. Lovano emerged, playing Mr. Marsalis's ballad for trio, "Guy Lafitte," and he improvised so dreamily that it was hard to tell when improvisation gave way to theme. Finally Mr. Brecker reappeared for "Jig's Jig," set over a New Orleans parade beat. He improvised in his titanic, modern-harmony style and then in basic blues tonality.

Something was ventured, something was gained. New York's summer jazz festivals should have more nights like this.