

Making the Rounds

The Alice Arts Center Jazz Orchestra, Mike Vax, Music Director

For anyone to put on a big band show in this day requires an act of faith—some would say an act of madness. Nevertheless trumpeter Mike Vax has been doing just that any time he gets enough money together to bankroll another band. And on a recent evening at the Alice Arts Center in Oakland, California, his faith was finally rewarded with a full house. Publicity helped: there were articles in both the *East Bay Express* and the *Oakland Tribune*. An audience showed up that understood the music as art. And the musicians came to play.

An artful chorus of "America the Beautiful" inaugurated the projected series of concerts, and there was a brief speech by Oakland mayor Elihu Harris. "First Things First" by Don Schamber kicked things off to light applause as technicians adjusted the sound for the now-full auditorium. On "Nada Mas" by Johnny Richards, the band caught my ear with exactly the bass trombone and Latin percussion sound Richards wrote into the Stan Kenton book in the late 1950s. Things started to cook with "A Little Minor Booze" by Maynard Ferguson sideman Willie Maiden, and the audience responded for the first time with more than just the obligatory applause. Neal Hefti's classic Count Basie chart, "Li'l Darlin'," won over any who may have needed convincing. In what Vax promised would be the first of many solo spotlights in concerts to come, Kevin Porter gave a bravura display of trombone artistry on "I'm Getting Sentimental over You."

Vax himself played lead trumpet, and on a couple of occasions when he came down front to take a solo, his chair was taken by one of his students, Nathaniel Botts, who is a senior at College Park High School in Pleasant Hill, California. Nate also took a solo or two and traded fours with other band members, including Vax.

The second set featured a striking arrangement of Billy Strayhorn's "Chelsea Bridge," a composition by Lennie Niehaus written for Mike entitled "Vax Attacks," and "Mambo Caliente," a showcase for percussionist Pete Escovedo, who is probably the best-known member of the band. I think everyone in the band got at least one solo.

The instrumentation was six trumpets (including Botts, who sat out all but two or three numbers), five reeds in various configurations, five trombones, piano, bass, drums, and Latin percussion. The group was well rehearsed, and charts

that ranged from simple to fairly complex were played precisely and with verve. Drummer Dave Rokeach, who plays many big band dates in the San Francisco Bay Area, powered the group with style and authority. The only quibble I had was that the saxes seemed to have been overpowered by the brass in some registers. Where they should have contrasted clearly with the trumpets and trombones, they came across as an indistinct muddying of the background sound.

by Robert Tate

The Cyrus Chestnut Trio and the Christian McBride Quintet at the Bottom Line in New York

The Kenny Barron Trio at the Village Vanguard in New York

Cyrus Chestnut and Christian McBride shared a gig that evoked the days of regular double bills and cabaret-style entertainment, and Kenny Barron led a trio of legends at the Vanguard. Chestnut and Barron are both pianists who've been working on their own material lately, and McBride is the bassist of the moment, in high demand as a sideman for his speed, endurance, and time. For that matter, Ron Carter, who was working with Barron for the week, has been the bassist of the moment pretty much since he first picked the instrument up decades ago.

Cyrus and Christian shared a double bill in front of a packed house; Kenny, Ron, and drummer Ben Riley worked to their own packed house. On both nights in both clubs, everyone wore tailored suits and looked good. But while Cyrus's and Christian's threads were shiny and slick, Kenny and Ron were a little less flashy, a little more refined in their attire. And that's as apt a detail as any to illustrate the differences in their music.

In his own way, each of the headliners at the Bottom Line showed a flair for the dramatic. Chestnut packed his set with solos full of blazing notes and sweeping dynamics. McBride's band was introduced, and they promptly laid into a go-go-style theme for Christian to make his entrance to. The theme served as background music for the bassist's between-song chats with the crowd throughout the set, adding to the nightclub atmosphere. Both groups were heavy on stage presence but lacked cohesion. McBride's quintet in particular never quite gelled. Chestnut's band showed a little more musicality and adventuresome spirit in their performance.

Cyrus Chestnut is an enormously talented musician with big chops, a sense of history, and a trio to serve as the vehicle for his rumbling solos. Drawing heavily on the stride, boogie-woogie, and gospel traditions, Chestnut pulled a wealth of sound from his instrument, playing the crowd with his knack for dynamics and dazzlingly quick fingers. Bantering between tunes, cracking jokes, and building the music to controlled roars in just the right places, he was right at home in the role of entertainer and had the young, eager audience eating out of the palm of his mighty hand.

Working through their leader's originals and a few standards like "East of the Sun, West of the Moon," sidemen

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