



**Hank Jones**  
**Blue Note, New York City**  
**August 11, 2003**

**by Ashley Kahn**

Bösendorfers must dream of nights like this.

The piano at New York's Blue Note club was played by a series of legends, leading lights and long-distance runners all in celebration of Hank Jones's 85th birthday. From colleagues like Barry Harris and Kenny Barron, to acolytes like James Williams and Bill Charlap. From the soulful artistry of Harold Mabern and Monty Alexander to the modernity of Eric Reed and Gerri Allen. From the delicacy of Marian McPartland to the elbows of Hilton Ruiz. They—plus an A-list of other veterans (Roy Haynes, Clark Terry, George Mraz, Jimmy Heath, Ben Riley, George Coleman and even Oscar Peterson, who sadly declined to play)—gave it up for the man who was born in Mississippi, grew up a Michigander and split for the jazz road in the '30s.

The mash-up of styles and approaches charged the night with a palpable sense of challenge. Holding the stage for only one or two tunes meant all gave it their concentrated best. Williams kicked off the evening with a lively version of Mary Lou Williams's proto-bop tune "Lonely Moments." Alexander turned in a clap-along rave-up of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" (or some such spiritual). Terry led a spirited swing through "I Don't Want to Be Kissed." Coleman spiced "Secret Love" with an upper-register, Trane-like solo. Allen's take on Brother Thad Jones' "A Child Is Born" was evocative and resplendent.

After an artful Mraz solo, Nat Hentoff was heard to say, "Now there's an unsung talent." By night's end, it seemed the entire cast of performers fell into that category.

The festival-in-miniature lasted almost four hours and was smoothly executed, especially given the claustrophobic confines of the narrow nightclub. Despite the inevitable chatter and clogged aisles, music—and later champagne—flowed; musicians, fans and friends intermingled and cheered; and at a table near the stage, Hank held forth with his family, beaming at each toast or round of applause.

And there were many, all creatively rendered. Wish-I-were-there missives from Dave Brubeck, Mulgrew Miller and Jones' longtime bassist Ray Drummond. Historical praise from Nat Cole. An artful poem, titled "Hank You Thank," penned and read by Ira Gitler. Percussion master Candido—accompanying Ruiz—sounded out "Happy Birthday" on his congas. Jon Faddis—as cake-and-candles made their way to the stage—did the same on trumpet, with Williams lauding him for "finally" learning the melody.

There was little hope of the evening becoming overly serious or reverent; Jones himself made sure of that. Whenever near the mike, the venerable pianist went for the funny bone time and again. He joked about being "unaccustomed to public speaking," pretended to drink a glass of bubbly (his present post-op health status undoubtedly precludes consuming alcohol) and mugged as singer Freddy Cole—with arm around the slightly gaunt-looking Jones—sang a winsome version of "I'm Glad There Is You."

On the sincere tip—if the wide variety of toasts and thanks were distilled to one basic message—it would be that Hank is respected and adored by his peers for being a paragon of refinement, for inspiring by example, for remaining a guiding light as jazz has changed and evolved. "He's still the alpha and omega of the piano," stated Williams at one point. As if to prove the point, Jones himself, joined by Mraz and Hayes, offered tasteful takes of a bebop classic ("Au Privave"), a ballad ("Polka Dots and Moonbeams") and the night's highpoint: an elegant, heartstring-wrenching version of "Round Midnight." (A bright green snake—as in the electric cable—winding upstairs gave notice that the music was being recorded, and word has it that Half Note—the club's small label—has plans to eventually release a selection of the night's music.)

Yes, there were things that could have been improved upon: better stage access for some of the older-timers would've been nice, and Brother Elvin Jones sure was missed. But final kudos to Williams and Charles Carlini (co producers of the event) for keeping it intimate and allowing the appropriate balance—of formal and informal, scripted and surprise—to shape a jazz party of this sort.