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MUSIC

## A Young Jazzman Turns 85

By KURT NOVAK

Flugelhornist Clark Terry blew a short call-to-arms from his seat in the audience, signaling the guest of honor's entrance at the opening of the Hank Jones 85th birthday celebration at the Blue Note last month. It was possibly the greatest gathering of jazz musicians in New York since Art Kane's famous 1958 photograph "A Great Day in Harlem."

Throughout the evening, 13 small groups, including a rotating cast of some 35 performers, played tribute to the ageless Mr. Jones, known within the jazz community as a king of the piano. Fully three-quarters of the house, including Oscar Peterson, Stanley Crouch and Ira Gitler, appeared to be admiring musicians and writers. (Mr. Peterson called him "probably the best pianist in jazz today.") But it is not just a lyrical touch and unerring melodic sense that have endeared Mr. Jones to his musical collaborators. His warm personality, sense of humor and love for his craft seem to have been equally important to his long-term success.

Eldest of the renowned Jones brothers (including drummer Elvin and the late trumpeter/composer Thad), Hank Jones was born in 1918, grew up in Pontiac, Mich., and moved to New York in 1944 to play with trumpeter Hot Lips Page. Since then, Mr. Jones has worked with practically every major figure in jazz, including Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Coleman Hawkins, Charlie Parker and Ella Fitzgerald. Along the way Mr. Jones developed a reputation as one of the world's leading accompanists.

How does one sustain a 50-year-plus career in a field known for its problematic personalities, inconsistent popular appeal and less than ideal working conditions? "Diversify," he said, in a conversation a few days before the concert. One of the most important lessons he learned is to "be prepared. . . . Arrange your personal affairs so that you don't get caught off guard -- always have something in reserve."

For Mr. Jones, this meant not only knowing how to adjust his playing to suit the given situation or soloist -- the essence of jazz -- but developing the ability to read music fluently so he could work in a variety of settings, such as those encountered in his 15-year stint with the CBS Radio & Television orchestra.

Mr. Jones noted that he aspires to play with the command of Art Tatum, who "never played a run that wasn't an integral part of his conception of a composition." And, he noted, despite Tatum's advance harmonics and complex rhythms "I am always able to recognize the melody in Tatum's playing." But pure technique is not the only factor to consider in the collaborative art of making improvised jazz music.

Mr. Jones liked working with Ella Fitzgerald because "she had an even temperament and always approached performing with energy and enthusiasm. She was eager to learn new material and she was kind and considerate . . . a real sincere individual."

He said he also liked playing with saxophonist Coleman Hawkins, "a great player" and another artist with an uncommon ability to adapt. "Hawkins could play with anyone, whether it was swing or bebop with relative newcomers like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. It didn't matter what it was -- Hawkins could do it." Another proof of Coleman Hawkins's genius, according to Mr. Jones, was "the perfect jazz record . . . I never get tired of 'Body and Soul.' You can play that over and over, and because of the combination of Hawkins's brilliant playing or the sound of the chords or whatever, you just don't get tired of it."

Apparently people don't get tired of Hank Jones either, as witness the hundreds of recordings he has played on, not to mention the camaraderie and good spirits displayed by all of the musicians at the Blue Note tribute.

Instrumentalists of various generations played on this powerhouse showcase of talent, organized by Charles Carlini and

pianist James Willams. Participants included not only Mr. Terry but Jimmy Heath, Freddie Cole, Lewis Nash, Candido, Rufus Reid, Peter Nash, Ben Riley, Marian McPartland, Barry Harris, Kenny Barron, Ray Barretto, Bill Charlap, Geri Allen and many others.

Midway through the evening Mr. Jones himself got on the bandstand, joined by bassist George Mraz and drummer Louis Hayes, and demonstrated to all that he is in full command.

Says Mr. Mraz of Hank Jones: "He is one of the youngest piano players I've ever worked with . . . always coming in with new stuff and open to new ideas." Not too bad for a young man of 85.

***Mr. Novak, an installation artist and sculptor, is an art director at the Journal in New York.***

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