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## THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

WSJ.com

NY CULTURE | MARCH 4, 2011

# Virtuosos in Solos, Duos and Trios

By WILL FRIEDWALD



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Alan Nahigian

Nicholas Payton and his big band, pictured at Dizzy's on Tuesday, remain at the club through Sunday.

### *Nicholas Payton Big Band*

#### **Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola**

Broadway at 60th Street, (212) 258-9595

*Through Sunday*

Most big bands are started because some musician wants a bigger sound, or, to put it in a fanciful way, a bigger swing; there's no noise more joyful than 14 horns in perfect sync with one another, swinging you into bad health. But Nicholas Payton's ambition in introducing his new big band at Dizzy's this week is not to create a bigger sound but a broader one. While the band certainly swings, he is clearly much more driven by the

idea of expressing himself in a much wider range of tonal colors. He doesn't have five saxophonists just for their collective volume, but because they also play clarinets, flutes and other reeds. Mr. Payton's gifts as a trumpet soloist have never been open to question, and now with this latest effort he establishes himself as a composer-arranger-maestro on par with any working today.

Mr. Payton, who at 37 is one of the youngest of the legendary line of New Orleans trumpet kings, has shown his fascination for jazz composition not only in his own tunes, but by participating in a series of albums exploring the works of top-shelf composers like Wayne Shorter ("Mysterious Shorter"), Lee Morgan ("The Sidewinder") and Louis Armstrong ("Dear Louis"). His 1997 treatment of compositions by Herbie Hancock was titled "Fingerpainting," and it's clear that the analogy to visual art is appropriate. With his 21-piece orchestra, Mr. Payton is painting not just with his fingers but with a vast array of sonic tools, including five trumpets (in addition to himself as primary soloist), four trombones and five saxes (nearly all doubling various reeds), plus bass and drums, Latin percussion, guitar, and, unexpectedly, keyboardist Lawrence Fields playing mostly Fender Rhodes organ.

Even more surprising is contralto Johnaye Kendrick, who doesn't sing anything like a conventional big-band vocal refrain all night, but who conjoins with the leader in forming a two-person vocal section; occasionally there are words, but they're generally chanted in what sounds like an African dialect, indicating that it isn't about the lyrics but the sonic quality of the two voices and they way in which they blend with the other orchestral colors. Mr. Payton "paints" in a very expansive range of hues and shades: impressionistic sounds somewhat reminiscent of Gil Evans, funky backbeat sounds that had me thinking of Duke Pearson's larger format backgrounds for various Blue Note stars of the 1960s, and an undercurrent of tropical rhythms (Cuban and Brazilian) running through all of it. (He didn't play one

number that was entirely Latin, nor did he play one that was entirely non-Latin, either.)

The strength of this mostly young band (the veteran in the group is baritone saxophonist Patience Higgins) isn't its diversity, but its cohesiveness, the way these wide-ranging elements hang together. When you listen, you're not thinking about the polyculturalism of the whole thing, you're thinking how pretty it all sounds.

For all the beauty of Mr. Payton's original works, I was especially impressed with two reworkings of New Orleans-centric jazz classics (both on "Dear Louis"), including a high-octane "Potato Head Blues," wherein the potatoes have been converted into ethanol fuel for a rocket ship. He climaxed the second set with a whimsical "Tiger Rag," democratically giving the five trumpeters in his section (most noticeably the talented Bria Skonberg) a chance to step into the spotlight. Other than the brass battle, the ancient New Orleans tiger seemed to be bobbing and weaving all over the French Quarter, as if the big kitty, like everybody else in the Crescent City, had lapped up too much bourbon on Liquor Street. (Or is it the other way around?)

### *Ethan Iverson, Larry Grenadier, Paul Motian*

#### **The Village Vanguard**

178 Seventh Ave. South, (212) 255-4037

*Through Sunday*

You could call this trio "the Bald Plus," since pianist Ethan Iverson and drummer Paul Motian both sport heads as clean as that of your humble columnist. Bassist Larry Grenadier, fortunately, has enough hair for everyone. Most bands led by the drummer (in his second phase of a three-week, three-ensemble Motian-a-thon at the Vanguard) favor an amorphous, somewhat rubato, out-of-time feel, whereas Mr. Iverson's usual group, the Bad Plus, tends to phrase solidly on the beat and all over it. In finding a common ground that suits them both, Messrs. Iverson and Motian have arrived at a groove that's immediately reminiscent of Thelonious Monk. It's especially apparent on standards like "It's Easy to Remember," "If I Had You," a Mozartean "Windmills of Your Mind" and "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," in which verse and chorus follow the outline and vibe of Bing Crosby. Aided by Mr. Grenadier, they concoct a uniquely postmodern brand of lyricism.



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Alan Nahigian

Recent New York transplant Kurt Elling is at Birdland.

### *Kurt Elling*

#### **Birdland**

315 W. 44th St., (212) 581-3080

*Through Saturday*

What do you get when you mix Allen Ginsberg with Anita O'Day, Ezio Pinza, Maynard G. Krebs, and Archbishop Fulton Sheen? The answer is Kurt Elling, a beat poet (and a recently transplanted New Yorker and Grammy winner) with chops like a Metropolitan opera baritone, time like a great drummer, and a penchant for philosophical discourse. His opening set at Birdland on Tuesday was heavily percussive; bassist Harish

Raghavan and pianist (and longtime collaborator) Laurence Hobgood essentially played their instruments as if they were drums. So did Mr. Elling himself, as he simulated the sound of drumsticks whacking on his larynx and traded measures with percussionist Terreon Gully in a way that suggested a drum battle. The overwhelming spirit was that of pianist-composer Ahmad Jamal; most tunes (including some by Lennon & McCartney, Stevie Wonder and Sammy Cahn, all found on Mr. Elling's new album, "The Gate") had long rhythmic vamps running through them—in a "Poinciana" kind of way.

### *The Music of Kurt Weill*

**Rose Theater (Jazz at Lincoln Center)**

Broadway at 60th Street, (212) 258-9595

*Through Sunday*

German composer Kurt Weill (1900-50) was profoundly influenced by American jazz, and his music, in turn, has been taken up by jazz musicians of every stripe, from Dixielanders to the avant-garde. (The spectrum of vocalists who do his songs, from opera sopranos to grunge rockers, is even wider). A full-out jazz concert of his music by Wynton Marsalis and his Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra is long overdue—yet the timing, in a season that has seen excellent productions of both "Knickerbocker Holiday" and "Lost in the Stars," is actually perfect. Guest Weill specialist Ute Lemper will presumably demonstrate a solidly traditional vocal approach to Weill's music, while the LCJO will perform jazz interpretations both old and new, surely including Gil Evans's masterpiece treatments of "My Ship" and "Bilbao Song," as well as whatever surprises they've got up their sleeve.

*Fred Hersch Duos & Trio +2***Jazz Standard**

116 E. 27th St., (212)-576-2232

*Through Sunday*

There are only a precious few top-drawer vocal accompanists out there, but what pianist Fred Hersch achieves with singers is even more rarified: He's their perfect partner. He can start a set with a singer I like, and within 60 minutes, turn that person into a singer I love through means of his sensitivity, inventiveness, harmonic and rhythmic mastery, and sheer charisma. On Tuesday night, Kate McGarry, already an A-lister, jumped into the A+ column as she and Mr. Hersch rendered a well-considered tune stack, capped by a playful, Betty Carter-esque "Girl Talk" and a thoughtful medley that combined Walt Whitman with Dimitri Tiomkin. The rest of the weekend features Mr. Hersch's five-piece trio with trumpeter Ralph Alessi and saxophonist Noah Preminger, and an equally promising duo with saxophonist Joshua Redman. As a follow-up, Mr. Hersch is participating a verbal duo—a conversation with critic Gary Giddins—on March 23 at CUNY.

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