

JAZZ REVIEW

Imagining and Improvising

By PETER WATROUS

For the last two years Wynton Marsalis has played a benefit for Smalls in Greenwich Village, virtually unannounced. Mr. Marsalis started a three-day stand on Monday night, using a group of young musicians who were some 10 to 15 years his junior. Completely informal and attended by musicians and jazz fans, the show brought out the best in everyone; the point was to improvise, to make the material vanish under the weight of the imagination.

Mr. Marsalis, who started at midnight, was having a good night, and on several solos it was hard to believe that the trumpet could ever be played better. On "Embraceable You," he began his solo with long runs, then halfway through he slowed down, using slight embellishments in pitch to create a blues sound or long bent notes that recalled Johnny Hodges. On "Cherokee" he played a chorus or two against the furious brushwork of the drummer Ali Jackson; when the rest of the band joined in, his solo blossomed with drastic interval skips, all sorts of textural manipulation and almost impossibly long lines. Mr. Marsalis was deep into improvisational freedom.

The bassist Reuben Rogers and Mr. Jackson switched rhythms and feels, holding up the progress of

tunes with pedal points. Mr. Jackson improvised on one piece against the walk of Mr. Roger's bass, using the open sound of his tom-toms; he's becoming one of the most accomplished young drummers in New York. And Steve Riley, a young tenor saxophonist whom Mr. Marsalis is encouraging, played in an older style. The style didn't matter: Mr. Riley was improvising at an extremely high level, and the audience, cheering him on, knew it.

