

The Music Of Monk, Bent, Split And Floating

By PETER WATROUS

Jazz can be a wonderful mess of competing systems, and when the tenor saxophonist Teddy Edwards stepped up to play "Straight, No Chaser," at Alice Tully Hall on Thursday night, one of those systems took over.

For most of the concert, "Thelonious Monk: The High Priest of Modern Jazz," part of Jazz at Lincoln Center, the saxophonists and the trumpeters in the band had been playing not only the notes on the piano keyboard, but those in the cracks between the keys.

Black American music has expanded the emotional range of the European instruments at its disposal by adding notes that weren't meant to be; the best jazz musicians investigate the cracks and crevices of pitch.

And Mr. Edwards, 72, is one of the masters of the smear, of emotional revelation coming from the play of intonation, a note arrived at from above or below. So he bent notes. He squeezed lines from his horn, lines that were out of tune if judged by the rigidity of a piano. He riffed a bit, and hit notes straight on, and always went back to the same emotional ground of melancholy, where sound was pliable and soft, where the colorations of what he played were his. He



Stephanie Berger for The New York Times

From left, Vincent Gardner, Ryan Kisor, Wess Anderson, Charles McPherson and Teddy Edwards, celebrating Thelonious Monk's music on Thursday at Alice Tully Hall.

claimed his territory and sounded like nobody else.

But other systems were evident during the concert, which was built on the idea of reevaluating Monk as composer. Several of his tunes suggested Afro-Caribbean rhythms; on "We See," the drummer played the Cuban clave rhythm, and on "Little Rootie Tootie," Marcus Roberts, the pianist and musical director of the program, tried an Afro-Cuban piano ostinato, if clumsily.

During several of Mr. Roberts's improvisations, jazz's allegiance to classical music showed up with static figures and harmonies. His lines were metronomically stiff and in deep contrast to his blues vocabulary and supple swing. And he suffused his har-

monies with the chilly sound of modernist classical music.

But what finally was the most impressive about the concert were the liberties taken by Mr. Roberts and several other arrangers, including Paul Jeffrey, Wycliffe Gordon and Wynton Marsalis, in interpreting Monk's compositions, and the formal ingenuity of the arrangements. Some pieces let flashes of a solo appear before shutting it down.

Others used polyphony, working on just a slight suggestion drawn from a composition. Mr. Roberts, using a front line of five horns, changed instrumental combinations and had Mr. Edwards playing with just Herlin Riley's drums, or paired off the piano and a trumpet. And on the first tune of the night,

"Jackie-ing," the orchestration used all the horn players to produce a rich and surprising sound.

What brought all the different elements of the show together was the rhythm section of Mr. Riley and the bassist Rodney Whitaker. Mr. Riley is from the South, and he and Mr. Whitaker introduced a type of swing that Monk's music never had; it was a dramatic, rhythmic reinterpretation of his work. "Little Rootie Tootie" and "Raise Four" were shockingly hard and sleek and insistent. For Mr. Edwards's solo on "Straight, No Chaser," the rhythm section opened up with gleaming, pearly swing. And the rhythm section's consistency and drive gave the soloists room to experiment. The saxophonist Wess Anderson bent and split notes on

several tunes and pushed harmonies around; everything floated on a pillow of rhythm.

Right before the intermission, Mr. Roberts invited the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis to come out for "Green Chimneys." Mr. Marsalis joined the front line; the piece went through several permutations, with riffs and solos and modern polyphony. At the end the audience sat silent, seemingly stunned by the piece's beauty. The composition sustained the arrangements' interpretation, and the performance pointed out not just how fertile Monk's works are for reimagining, but how excellence defies category.

The concert will be repeated tonight at 8 at Alice Tully Hall.