

Catching Up With a One-of-a-Kind Composer

By BEN RATLIFF

To listen to John Lewis's music today is to realize that a jazz composer doesn't need to lean on clichés. His music just doesn't sound like other jazz: not his tightly arranged solo piano miniatures, not the quietly swinging small-band music he played with the Modern Jazz Quartet, not his variety-filled work for large ensembles. In fact, no part of "Evolution: The Music of John Lewis," the retrospective concert given by the 80-year-old pianist and composer on Thursday night at Alice Tully Hall, brought to mind much else that's out there in the jazz world.

Mr. Lewis economizes at the piano, and his laconic style of phrasing and harmony places him in the same tradition as Ellington, Basie and Monk. But that is a tradition of percussive playing, and here again Mr. Lewis occupies a branch of his own: his sound can be soft to the point of self-effacement. He performed four pieces from his two latest albums, "Evolution" and "Evolution II" (Atlantic/WEA), albums that will remain important glimpses of a genius late in his career, and they were reworkings of old work recorded with the quartet, shrunk to their essence, a powerful musical code. His theme-setting introductions were so spare that sometimes only two right-hand notes filled a whole measure.

The program included four duet pieces

John Lewis at his Tully Hall retrospective with Wynton Marsalis on trumpet.

with Wynton Marsalis on trumpet, and until the last one, "Two Degrees East — Three Degrees West," Mr. Marsalis was uncharacteristically restrained. He played soft, short notes that he didn't bend and shape. Mr. Lewis's compositions and playing contain strong directives despite their outward modesty, and Mr. Marsalis seemed gripped by the need to economize. Finally he stood up and began to improvise freely, slurring and becoming expressive in the blues. Mr. Lewis followed with his own solo, and in five choruses he alternated the introduction of new melodic ideas with sequences of repetition and dissonance. It was ordered impro-

visation at its highest.

Beautiful as it was, there had been some torpor to the music until then. The trio section that followed, with the bassist Percy Heath (another member of the Modern Jazz Quartet) and the drummer Herlin Riley, put the evening on yet higher ground. The band swung in the most pared-down way. The best of the pieces was a chillingly beautiful "Blues in A Minor" (from the M.J.Q.'s "Blues on Bach" album), with Mr. Heath's bass tone singing out brightly above Mr. Lewis's low and level projection. They also

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