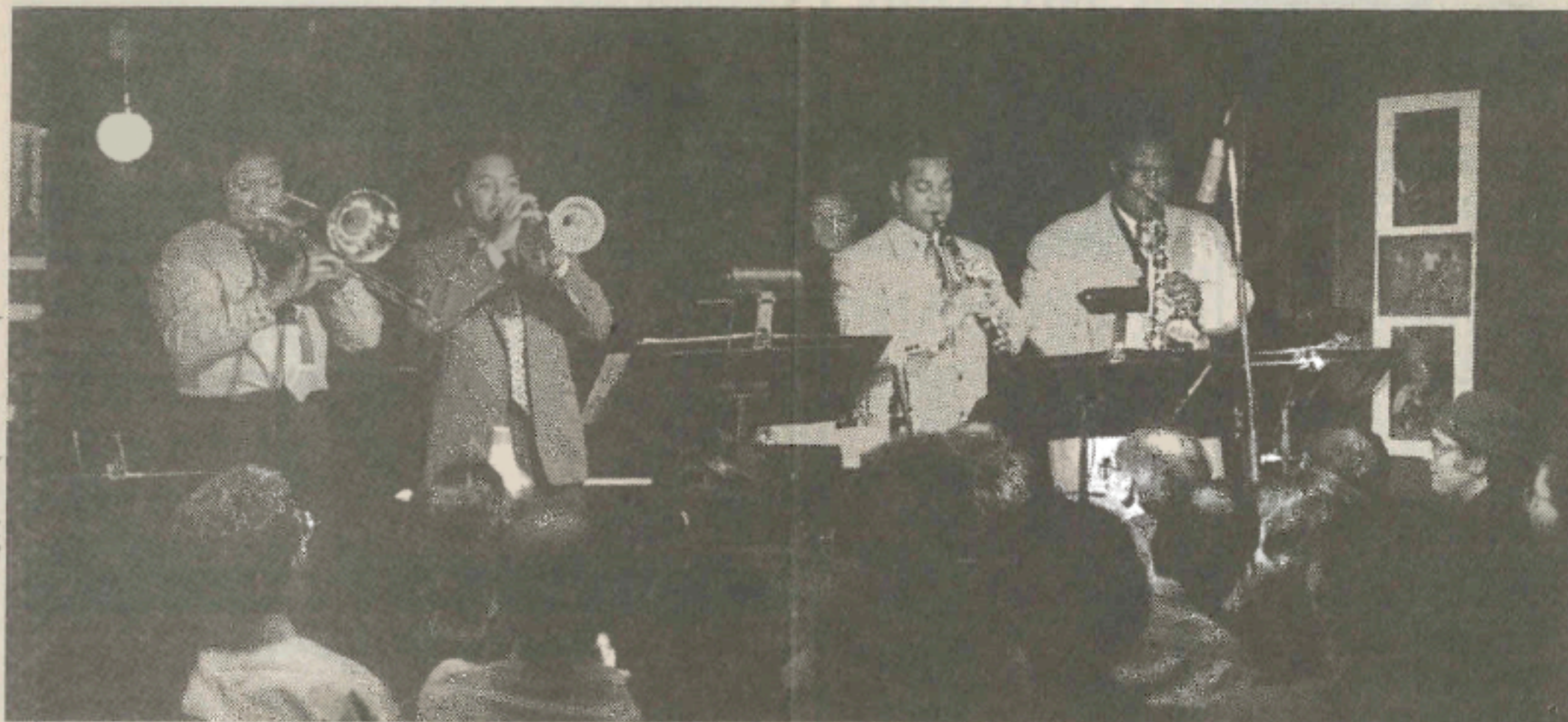


It's the End of the Riff for Wynton Marsalis's Septet



Jack Vartoogian

Members of Wynton Marsalis's septet shown here are, from left, Wycliffe Gordon, Mr. Marsalis, Ben Wolfe, Victor Goines and Wess Anderson.

By PETER WATROUS

Wynton Marsalis made news in his first set on Tuesday night at the Village Vanguard. Before he began to play, the trumpeter and band leader announced that this week's engagement would be the last for his septet, one of the most influential and active bands in jazz.

Mr. Marsalis had been hinting recently that he was about to take a sabbatical, and now it was official. "I'm going to enjoy this last week," he said from the stage, but there was a slight sense of sadness in the air, a feeling that something important had run its course.

After the announcement, the band broke into an extended blues, with Mr. Marsalis taking his time at first, then suddenly cramming in long lines. Later the septet played rearranged versions of Thelonius Monk's "Four in One" and "Evidence" back to back, and ended with an excerpt from Mr. Marsalis's suite

"Blood on the Fields." The music had a relaxed feel, the interplay among musicians seemed effortless.

Since Mr. Marsalis formed it seven years ago, the septet has functioned as a virtual workshop for some of the best young musicians playing. His pianists, for instance, have included Marcus Roberts, Stephen Scott, Cyrus Chestnut, Peter Martin and, currently, Eric Reed. More important, the band has been an invaluable example for younger musicians. In its control of harmony and texture, its easily identifiable group sound and its ability to reach audiences, the band has taught young musicians that there is a future in serious music, and that serious music has serious challenges beyond improvisation.

"When I first started really applying myself to jazz, in the late 1970's, all my role models were my parents' age," said one of Mr. Marsalis's saxophonists, Wess Anderson. "Jazz was something that I thought I'd do on weekends, for fun. Then Wynton

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came along and it became clear that this was something that could be done, and that I had peers. I think the band has been that way for a lot of young musicians, made them see that people their own age could play the music."

The septet now includes, besides Mr. Marsalis, Mr. Anderson and Mr. Reed, Victor Goines on saxophone, Wycliffe Gordon on trombone, Ben Wolfe on bass and Herlin Riley on drums. Largely because of the stature and influence of Mr. Marsalis, it has had more resources, musical and financial, than any other small group currently playing. Its range is

from New Orleans marches to reharmonized Thelonius Monk to the modernism of John Coltrane's classic quartet to deep blues.

The band has also played rare pieces by Duke Ellington, brooding, dark ballads, and generally used the history of the music as an archive.

"This band reached literally millions of people," said Mr. Marsalis after the set. "And we brought real, swinging jazz to a whole new generation of musicians. I'm happy with what we've achieved."

But now Mr. Marsalis, who is 33, is on to something else, and breaking up the band has become a necessity. He has been on the road for the last 15 years; the band plays three weeks out of the month, leaving only one week for Mr. Marsalis to attend to his other business, including helping run Lincoln Center's jazz program, teaching and scores of other obligations.

The recent success of "Blood on

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