

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Veteran Saxophonists Show More Than Age

By PETER WATROUS

Against the blank canvas of a neutral rhythm section, eight of the better improvisers in jazz grappled in a cutting contest at Avery Fisher Hall on Friday. Called "Battle Royale: Trumpets and Tenors 2," it was the public face of what the writer Albert Murray has named "antagonistic cooperation," where musicians, challenged by their peers, are pushed into further excellence. For the audience at the sold-out concert, few situations offered a better environment to investigate the differences among great improvisers.

And what became clear during the long show was that age in jazz can often be an indication of musical knowledge. The saxophonists, Von Freeman, Teddy Edwards, Johnny Griffin and Joe Lovano (the first three hovering around their seventh decade), played with so much information and wit that the audience was left in awe of the music and not the

In a cutting contest, jazzmen push one another to excel.

physicality of the performance.

The same can't be said of the performance of the trumpeters, Jon Faddis, Wynton Marsalis, Roy Hargrove and Nicholas Payton, who hammered away at each other with high notes and volume. The intent was not so much to perform well as to perform better than the others. And oddly, though the trumpeters were in some cases nearly 50 years younger than the saxophonists, they brought less harmonic and rhythmic daring to the session.

Cutting sessions "were always the way that musicians played for themselves," Mr. Edwards said before the concert; he is one of jazz's most imposing improvisers, but he lives in Los Angeles, and so is mostly unknown on the East Coast. "When we played, it was friendly competition.

leave blood on the floor, and we didn't resort to playing to the audience. The sessions were always about exploration."

For Mr. Edwards, who is celebrating his 60th year as a professional musician, cutting sessions are a part of his musical makeup. As a boy in Mississippi, he remembers a saxophonist from Milwaukee coming through town "chopping heads," using a harmonically advanced style; he sent Mr. Edwards toward a life-long study of harmony. When Mr. Edwards moved to Detroit as a young musician, he spent a good portion of his time at a club, the Bandbox, where players gained their reputations by facing off against one another. There were economic implications: the best were heard and hired by local band leaders.

And when Mr. Edwards moved to Los Angeles, he was part of the flourishing musical culture of Central Avenue during the 1940's, when he, Wardell Gray and Dexter Gordon held all-night jam sessions that have become legendary.

"You trade ideas and see if you can come up to the level," Mr. Edwards said. "Sometimes you fall short. It's a funny thing, one night it would be my night, the next Dexter's or Lucky Thompson's or Wardell's. Whatever happened, the next day you got up, put on a pot of beans and practiced all day."

Friday was in part Mr. Edwards's night; being a virtual unknown in New York, he had the most to gain, and against formidable competition he showed up his compatriots on the blues "Walkin'" and on the ballad "Tenderly."

The rest of the saxophonists have had plenty of experience proving themselves in competitive circumstances. Mr. Griffin made a series of records with John Coltrane, Hank Mobley and Eddie (Lockjaw) Davis. Mr. Lovano, the youngest of the group at 44, spent years playing jam sessions in Cleveland as a youth. Mr. Freeman still leads a jam session at his regular weekly show in Chicago.

For the musicians, cutting sessions were most often behind closed doors, where the musicians, after working their regular jobs at night retired to perform for themselves, to experiment and play, in the profound sense of the word.

"I don't think you need an audi-



Jack Vartoogian for The New York Times

The tenor saxophonists Teddy Edwards, left, and Von Freeman taking part in "Battle Royale: Trumpets and Tenors," at Avery Fisher Hall.

ly the people want musicians to out-blow each other, and the one high note or low note that gets the audience doesn't have anything to do with what's really happening onstage."

While this is all generous, competition still exists, and nobody wants to walk out a loser.

"Sure, I'm competitive," Mr. Faddis said. "I play my best spurred on by others, and also by the crowd. I have tricks I use, high notes for example. That's part of who I am."

Mr. Marsalis agreed.

"No matter what anybody says, nobody wants their head served to them," he said. "It has happened to everybody, and nobody likes it. Musicians are like athletes, they're not going to say, 'We're here to kill the other team.' They say, 'We're going to try and play our best,' by which they mean they're not planning to lose. And I know this: Everybody will be prepared."

Of the four trumpeters, Mr. Payton, the youngest and the least

known, had the most to gain. And on several pieces, his playing seemed the least keyed to intimidate. The trumpeters, in the exchanges, were all forced to deal with Mr. Faddis's enormous power and facility; Mr. Marsalis tried to match him and failed. The performances became a game of strategy, how to draw the other musicians onto one's own territory, to expose weaknesses. A high fast flurry, perhaps unanswerable, was met by long low notes. A searing run was answered by careful melodies.

And Mr. Payton, playing with a big, rich sound, managed just to improvise, with heat and intelligence, relying less on what the trumpeters around him were playing, and letting his solos open up. It was competitive, but more at the service of the music.

"I love jam sessions," he said. "They open your ears to interaction. You can play in a way which to me embodies the creative spirit that the music is about."

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