

JAZZ REVIEW

17 Ellington Bands From Just One

By **BEN RATLIFF**

There's a ton of talent in the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, and it doesn't take much of a pretext to dislodge it. Many orchestra members lead their own bands out in the world of nightclubs, and some day it would be rewarding to see a program that contrasts what they all hear in their heads — how, say, the saxophonist Ted Nash composes, chooses musicians and arranges for them as opposed to what the trombonist Wycliffe Gordon does.

But Duke Ellington is the binding glue for Jazz at Lincoln Center's programming through the end of the year, and Thursday night's concert at Alice Tully Hall, "Duke in Small Doses," had a steadier focus. It gathered small groups around different leaders from within the orchestra, in imitation of what Ellington and the impresario Irving Mills did during recording sessions in the late 1930's, making Johnny Hodges or Cootie Williams the band leader in front of five or six Ellington-band players. Thursday's material, of course, was all Ellington's, but it was up to each leader to twist and shape the music.

The orchestra's rhythm section — the pianist Farid Barron, bassist Rodney Whitaker and drummer Herlin Riley — stayed constant throughout, after the model of those 1930's sessions. That provision made a complicated show run seamlessly, with a different band emerging for each of 17 tunes. The rhythm section didn't always lift off; sometimes it took a persuasive arrangement from the leader to distinguish a piece, and a few too many numbers hewed to that sturdy but unremarkable jazz



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From left, Wycliffe Gordon, Wynton Marsalis, Wess Anderson and Victor Goines in "Duke in Small Doses" at Lincoln Center.

format, a string of solos sandwiched between themes. But by the end there was variety, a mixture of the polished with the informal.

The best arrangements stood out like spires. Mr. Gordon trumped the rest of the band on instrumentation, coming out with all the orchestra's trombonists — himself, Ron Westray and Andre Hayward — to play "Mood Indigo" in front of the rhythm section as a continually shifting balance of counterpoint harmony. Later he did it again, bringing on a nonet to play Ellington's gospel tune "Come Sunday" with an arrangement of sharply contrasting rhythmic sections. The music was sly and activated, pre-empting nostalgia.

Wynton Marsalis led a septet for "Rubber Bottom," a tune based on the chord changes of "I Got Rhythm," and suddenly there was interaction in the rhythm section,

with Mr. Barron shooting chords between Mr. Marsalis's trumpet notes and Mr. Riley altering drum patterns. Two saxophonists shone, improvising on ballads in pared-down settings: the tenor saxophonist Ted Nash, playing Billy Strayhorn's "Chelsea Bridge," and the baritone saxophonist Joe Temperley, exposing the the drawling, exotic beauty of "Sunset and the Mockingbird."

And two performances that on paper looked like minor interludes turned out to be marvelous: Rodney Whitaker's "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" for solo bass, which folded in a bit of Charles Mingus's "Haitian Fight Song," and a duet by Herlin Riley and the saxophonist Victor Goines on "Limbo Jazz," in which Mr. Riley made resourceful drum-kit music, clicking rims and castanets, hitting cowbells and rubbing drumheads.