

JAZZ REVIEW

As a National Tour Ends, Ellington Is in Focus

By BEN RATLIFF

Duke Ellington sounded stupendous on Saturday night. During the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra's all-Ellington program at Alice Tully Hall, you could almost see the music moving, as if sections of the band suddenly popped out in relief when a phrase passed through it. It was a repertoire performance on an unusually high level; justice to the arrangements was served.

The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra has been touring the country since March, drawing from a large pool of Ellington pieces almost every night in a program called "America in Rhythm and Tune," and the listeners on Saturday at Alice Tully, the last stop of the tour, were the beneficiaries of the band's practice. Twenty-five years after his death and 70 years after some of the music in the concert was written, Ellington is still the arranger to beat. As David Berger's transcriptions for Jazz at Lincoln Center helpfully displayed, Ellington put the terraced assembly of his big band to use, giving his music an important spatial dimension. Some of the nuances can whizz right by a listener on recordings but are plain to hear in concert.

At the concert's best moments, conjoined lines of music flew from the back to the front of the stage,

Sections of the band seem to stand out in relief.

from the trumpets to the reeds and back; in the case of "Braggin' in Brass," a fast, devilishly complex piece from the late 1930's, the triplets played by three muted trombones made the notes shuttle from left to right.

But Ellington also wrote rhythm section parts strong and lunging enough to counteract preciousness. Mostly sidestepping Ellington's pop hits, Wynton Marsalis and the orchestra chose heady stuff for the Saturday night program. "Amad" (from "The Far East Suite") and "Bonga" (from "Afro-Bossa") were both powered by Latin grooves and driving piano figures. For pure orchestral effect, there was "Track 360," a two-minute tone poem about two trains meeting that does away with any sort of standard form. In it, a series of strong but tiny motifs bloom and disappear, while a 4/4 rhythm remains unchanged underneath; the orchestra added Doppler effects to each decaying idea. "Ad Lib on Nippon" is a suite unto itself, and it began with a serene, free-



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Wynton Marsalis performing with the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

rhythm piano fantasia by Farid Barroon, entered Ellington's mysterious six-note, wide-interval theme, then charged into the high drama of the composer's orchestral sound, with reeds adding sadness to the brass. Finally it turned into a long clarinet solo for Victor Goines, who followed the model of Jimmy Hamilton's original without imitating it: while the band raced behind him, he stayed close to a select handful of original riff ideas, squeezing the juice out of them. He was on.

And he wasn't alone: the trombonist Wycliffe Gordon, in short solos through the evening, made his instrument chatter with mutes and articu-

lation effects; the trumpeter Marcus Printup delivered a solo carrying the harmonic imprint of his own imagination, and Mr. Marsalis contributed two strutting, preaching trumpet solos over slow tempos, full of space and canny in their note-placement. But perhaps the star of the evening was the drummer Herlin Riley, whose swing was hard and mean, whose control over volume never points out the sonic inadequacies of the hall for jazz, and whose technique is pinpointed: a blink, and you missed how he malleted a cymbal, then turned its report into waves by flapping a hand over it. And he kept playing, without stopping the flow.