

Chuck Berg: Howe mines new Ellington gold
Posted: October 16, 2011 – 8:44pm

West Coast pianist Ted Howe regaled a full house of Topeka Jazz Workshop patrons with a Sunday afternoon concert that mined new gold from the happily inexhaustible Ellington lode.

Intertwining tales of The Duke's fabled life with ear-grabbing variations on such indelible melodies as "Do Nothing Til You Hear from Me," Howe had us sitting at the edge of our seats wanting more.

In setting up "Do Nothing..." for example, Howe, after reminiscing on the warmth of the Count Basie-Duke Ellington relationship, served up a leisurely and sparsely noted romp redolent of Basie's bluesy KC barbecue-flavored heritage.

Howe, who has lifted bandstands with jazz icons Joe Williams, Buddy Rich and Mel Torme, as well as the singular Diahann Carroll and Henry Mancini, is a modern melodist conversant in jazzdom's great keyboard traditions.

In a jaunty dash through "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing," Howe let loose with several blazing choruses that evoked Ellington's love of the stride piano giants of his Washington, D.C., childhood, such as Fats Waller.

Dialing the tempo down, Howe also proved a compelling balladeer. His luminescent limning of "Prelude to a Kiss," for instance, hit all the right places with romantic pianistic waves made poignant with hauntingly astringent harmonies.

Abetting Howe with pitch-perfect support were drummer Tommy Ruskin and bassist Gerald Spaits, whose status as world-class jazz musicians we sometimes tend to take for granted since they hail from Kansas City.

Indeed, the combination of Howe's lean yet perfectly crafted arrangements, which helped shape intros and outros along with Ruskin's and Spaits' note-perfect as well as inspired playing gave the trio uncommon polish and panache.

Together, the trio breathed as one. Soaring up here, swooping down there, they laced genuinely spontaneous solos into and around Howe's well-mapped charts that made everything move.

Howe generously shared the spotlight with his peers. Spaits, for example, leaned into the rich contours of "Mood Indigo" with a rich plangent sound and lovely articulation of the melody that was all satin and silk.

Ruskin, for his part, stopped traffic in Howe's ear-grabbing take on "Caravan." For Juan Tizol's exotic hit for the Ellington Orchestra, the nonpareil Ruskin opened with a spectacular demonstration of virtuosic stick work.

Soon, it was his hands, and then fingers, and then his percussive scat singing that carried the day. We were all astounded. So, too, was the beaming Howe.

It was a happy afternoon with the crowd standing and cheering enthusiastically with the curtain-closing "Take the 'A' Train" taken at a burning tempo whose speed suggested more a bullet train than the storied New York City subway.

Ted Howe — a jazz pianist extraordinaire. Salute!

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