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# Marsalis and Friends Play Ellington, Selflessly

By PETER WATROUS

A band takes on a look when it's in control. The body language of the musicians, casual and relaxed, tells the story. The band members joke with one another, but when they start to play they get serious, and each piece fits together seamlessly. It becomes a performance of music, not craft, and the music is selfless.

That authority is usually felt only by a band that performs regularly, and in which everyone knows his role. The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, which performed on Monday night at Alice Tully Hall, had that sort of confidence. On the road since early September, the band played music that was tight yet relaxed, clearly the product of a band of musicians who had put their identities aside to produce a rich group sound. While there were improvisations, usually short and shorn of clichés, they were subservient to the overall shape of the music.

The fare was mostly Ellington, which has traditionally been the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra's strong point, and mostly postwar Ellington. Led by Wynton Marsalis, the orchestra cruised through sections of Ellington's suites, taking "Magnolias Dripping With Molasses" and "Happy-Go-Lucky Local" from "The Deep South Suite" and movements from "Such Sweet Thunder" and "Toot Suite," along with pieces like "Afro Bossa" and gems like "Track 360." Mr. Marsalis, whose body



Jack Vartogian

Wynton Marsalis with members of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra at Alice Tully Hall on Monday night.

seemed to meld into the band as he conducted, interspersed his interpretations of Ellington with excerpts from his own work, taken from a composition for the Twyla Tharpe Dance Company and "Blood on the Fields."

It takes audacity to plop your own orchestral works down next to Ellington's, but Mr. Marsalis pulled it off. His orchestral compositions have so thoroughly absorbed both the esthetic and the sound of Ellington that they derive logically from the work.

One of Mr. Marsalis's pieces, "Back to Basics," had the orchestra playing virtually without melody but with a great deal of texture, as it ruminated over the Afro-American brass vocabulary, filled with shouts and verbal-

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izations from the horns. "Root Groove," another Marsalis composition, poised the muted trombone of Wycliff Gordon performing a gorgeous upturned melody against four soprano saxophones voiced with post-impressionist, modern harmonies.

As always, the sound of Ellington played by a full orchestra is a revelation, an entirely different experience from hearing it on disk. Especially with the later compositions, Ellington took care in arranging textures ("Track 360" had the trumpeters changing mutes during the song), harmonies and the rhythm section. It takes a precise band to execute the material, and on "The Telecasters," silence shone through the gaps left in the music by the rhythm section: Eric Reed on piano, Ben Wolfe on bass and Herlin Riley on drums.

It was the rhythm section that kept the band going. Both Ellington and Mr. Marsalis prefer a tempo that falls between slow and medium, one in which musicians can think and play at the same time and the vocal qualities of an improviser can be well framed. It's also a tempo that's difficult for most rhythm sections to sustain. But these three players were glued together, swinging continuously, with Mr. Reed using Ellington's piano style to add space to the performances.

Lincoln Center's band, in its fealty to Ellington, may not be going for a radical rewriting of jazz history, but in its excellence and its sense that Ellington is worth preserving, it is radical enough.