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Fewer Gigs Means Fewer Jazz Bands

By ROXANE ORGILL

ALL IT TAKES IS A WALK through the jazz departments of record stores to see that recording companies are signing young players aggressively and promoting them heavily. Poster-size likenesses of Roy Hargrove, Cyrus Chestnut, James Carter, Nicholas Payton and Christian McBride gaze from the walls alongside those of John Coltrane and Charlie Parker. But one thing isn't seen beyond the spotlight: while younger players may be making CD's, they aren't doing much performing.

Opportunities for live performance are so limited that only a handful of the so-called young lions — including Mr. Hargrove, Joshua Redman, Jacky Terrasson and, of course, Wynton Marsalis — can provide enough work to keep a band together. For musicians who don't have major recording contracts, the struggle is even greater.

The effect on jazz could be disastrous, because without working bands, the music can't develop. Whereas a classical score sits on a shelf until a conductor takes it down and leads an orchestra through a performance, jazz comes out of an oral tradition. The music has to be played, and by people who are familiar enough with one another to go out on a limb, to experiment as Joe Oliver did with Louis Armstrong in the Creole Jazz Band and as Duke Ellington did with his orchestra, John Lewis with the Modern Jazz Quartet and Miles Davis with his various quintets and sextets.

"For the music to go forward and for the band to sound like a group, you need to play together all of the time," says Mr. Terrasson, a pianist who records for Blue Note.

"You really need to be on the road."

Mr. Terrasson, 29, fresh from a two-month tour with his trio of the United States and Europe, explains the advantages: "If we get to some place and have to play in three hours, we're in the same mood. It's like we're always traveling with the same waves."

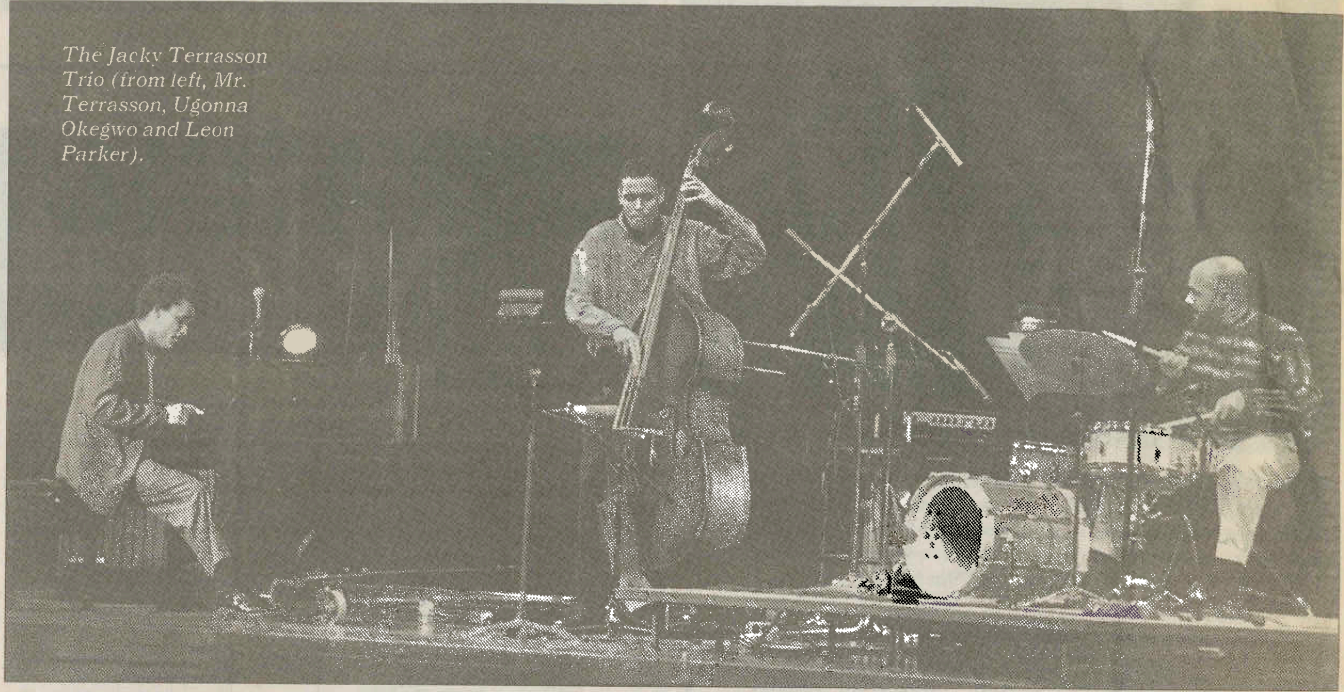
But only a lucky few can swing a big tour, even with a major-label contract. After Mr. Payton's debut album came out on Verve, the trumpet player and his band performed for a week at the Village Vanguard in New York, played one-nighters in six other cities and went home. After a recent trip to Japan, Mr. Payton's schedule was empty. And this is the man about whom the trumpet legend Doc Cheatham said, in *Down Beat* magazine, "I haven't heard anybody like him since Louis Armstrong."

Mr. Payton, 21, says simply: "There aren't enough venues. I could tell you a ton of musicians out here who are talented — I mean, they can play — but they can't keep a band together."

"Musicians have to work at whatever opportunity they can get," he adds. "If your drummer gets a call to go on tour with somebody, you can't say, 'Stay, I might have some gigs coming up.' They have to make a living."

Even players at the top have trouble keeping personnel: Mr. Redman, a saxophonist, who is on the road about 45 weeks a year, has had several bands and has been

The Jacky Terrasson Trio (from left, Mr. Terrasson, Ugonna Okegwo and Leon Parker).



Jack Vartoogian

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working with his present quartet only since January. As an example of the turnover, he lost Mr. McBride, a bassist, after five months to a record deal with Verve.

Mr. McBride, 23, didn't have a band of his own for his first recording date, so he put together an all-star group that included Mr. Redman, Mr. Hargrove, Mr. Chestnut and, for one number, two of his heroes, the bass-

ists Ray Brown and Milt Hinton. Getting stars into a studio was the easy part. When Mr. McBride listened to the CD, he realized, "I've got to come up with a group that will live up to the album."

He's still trying. He has been performing regularly since mid-March, with four different drummers: Lewis Nash, Gregory Hutchinson, Carl Allen and Brian Blade. "It's going to get better once I'm able to keep a drummer for more than one gig," Mr. McBride says drily.

But things have always worked this way in jazz, more or less. Players move in and out of bands. Flexibility — the ability to play with anyone, anytime — is considered a virtue. The difference is that in years past there were enough clubs booking mainstream jazz to go around. A leader could put a band together, play for a few weeks or months, then make an album to document the musical advances honed on the bandstand. The time a band spent together was

concentrated — and audible. "The first time Miles recorded 'So What?', it sounded one way," says Mr. McBride. "Two or three years later, it sounded like a completely different song. That's the way it's supposed to be."

Then again, maybe the players are putting too much emphasis on club dates. Dan Morgenstern, director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, says that since the end of the "golden era," the Swing era of big bands and ballrooms, musicians have had to look beyond clubs for work, to places like Broadway and television. Musicians today can get work at college jazz clinics, jazz parties sponsored by national jazz clubs and the international festivals, Mr. Morgenstern says. "The bottom line is you got to hustle," he adds.

Steve Wilson knows about hustling. As one of the most in-demand sidemen in New York, he plays with Mulgrew Miller's Wing-

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span, Leon Parker's band, the Smithsonian Jazz Masterworks Orchestra, Bruce Barth's quintet and the James Williams Intensive Care Unit, among others. Being a sideman may lack glamour, but Mr. Wilson says the experience is crucial to being a good leader. "It's like an apprenticeship," says the 34-year-old alto saxophone player. "You get a chance to find out how to shape your own ideas within certain parameters. You see how the leader approaches the business and the relationship with his sideplayers. You get a chance to observe every aspect of being a musician."

But even a hustler like Mr. Wilson has trouble getting more than one-nighters for his own band, which has recorded four albums for the Criss Cross label in Holland. And one-nighters, he says, are counterproductive. "If you get one night, you don't get a chance to exploit the musical possibilities," he says. "It doesn't make sense to rehearse the band, because you can't pay the guys. It doesn't pay in terms of musical presentation either. I like to go in and do things other than play standards; present my musical direction, instead of just playing the gig. If I have two nights, I can do more."

Maria De Angelis, a 34-year-old singer, went through a kind of trial by fire to land one job for her trio, at the Squire, a small bar in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. The bar used to hold weekly jam sessions for singers, "an unbelievable battlefield" where the house band "trashed singer after singer, playing polyrhythmic beats so the singer couldn't find

where the time was, or altering the the chords, so the singer couldn't find the melody line," she says. "I showed up faithfully every week, and the manager finally succumbed and gave me a few dates."

But the Squire is a schmoozy kind of place where patrons talk throughout the sets, and after three nights, she moved on. "If I'm going to do one-nighters, I'd rather have them be one-nighters where people are listening," she says.

Ms. De Angelis and her trio now have a prized regular Monday night gig at Eamon Doran, a bar near Madison Square Garden. That's enough to keep the band together, for the moment. When a band does manage to stay together for any length of time, though, good things happen. Mr. Terrasson and his trio — including Mr. Parker, the drummer, and the bassist Ugonna Okegwo — have been together off and on for two years, and Mr. Terrasson has recently begun to play his own tunes more. "Before, I knew how to write the tunes," he says, "but it was difficult for me to play them and feel comfortable because I never felt I had the right context."

That's what Miles Davis had when he took his sextet into the recording studio in the spring of 1959. The tunes had been sketched out only hours before, and their modal harmonic language was familiar only to the pianist Bill Evans. But every take used on the album was the first complete performance of that composition, and the LP, "Kind of Blue," became a classic. The sextet had been performing steadily, to capacity audiences, for about a year. □