

Jazz, New Orleans style, at Powell

By Sarah Bryan Miller

02/21/2009

It wasn't the usual setup at Powell Symphony Hall: In front of a set of black curtains that stretched the length of the stage sat a grand piano, a trap drum set, a sousaphone, four straight chairs and a bar stool. d

On Friday the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra took a night off. In their place was the touring Preservation Hall Jazz Band, playing their distinctive New Orleans jazz for an appreciative audience.

There were seven names in the program: Rickie Monie, piano; Walter Payton, bass and vocals; Ralph Johnson (playing clarinet, not saxophone as listed); Clint Maedgen, saxophone and vocals; Mark Braud, trumpet; Frank Demond, trombone; and Joe Lastie, percussion.

Not credited was Ben Jaffe, the band's director and the son of the couple who long ran Preservation Hall, an extravagantly dreadlocked bundle of nervous energy who played sousaphone and tambourine (sometimes simultaneously), did vocals, spoke and performed a high-powered bass solo.

The music is an earthier version of Dixieland, with the trumpeter taking the lead most of the time. Braud is totally at home in this long-established tradition; he's the nephew of the Hall's former bandleader, the late John Brunious, Jr.

He and Monie were the evening's standouts, both of them technically impressive and musically moving. They started the concert together on "Slow Blues;" the rest of the band entered during the second number, "Bourbon Street."

It's a tight group, consummately professional, with the kind of connectedness that comes with having performed together for a long time and in all manner of circumstance. Their sets went smoothly; they took the spotlight for solos and then handed it back graciously. With the exception of Maedgen, whose voice and overstated mannerisms grated, they all seemed to be more about the music than themselves.

Among their numbers were -- entirely appropriately -- "St. Louis Blues" and "Tiger Rag." Other highlights included a charged-up "Shake It and Break It," and, at the other end of the scale, Monie's touching, remarkable "His Eye is on the Sparrow."

The official program ended with an over-the-top "Go to the Mardi Gras" (complete with the wind players parading through the house, much bead-tossing and some kinetically overinspired members of the audience coming up to dance onstage), and, of course, "When the Saints Go Marching In."

As well done as it was, it was too loud; there is no need to amplify a grand piano in Powell's excellent acoustic. Printing the selections in the program would have been helpful.