
JACK KLEINSINGER and
46 YEARS OF JAZZ HIGHLIGHTS

Passing the middle mark of its fifth decade the long-running Highlights in Jazz series shows no signs of slowing down. “We’re doing the concerts other producers don’t do,” says series producer Jack Kleinsinger, “and in the process we’ve outlasted everyone who’s ever done jazz concerts in the history of New York.”

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Did you ever have a favorite restaurant that you kept going back to, year after year? You can rely on the menu, the chef’s specials never disappoint and you always walk away satisfied. You recognize the proprietor and he recognizes you by your first name.

In the world of Broadway musicals, the song was written about “good old reliable Nathan Detroit.” When we’re talking about favorite, reliable Manhattan concerts, Jack Kleinsinger operates the oldest established permanent “floating” jazz show in New York.

When Kleinsinger began producing jazz concerts at Greenwich Village’s Theatre de Lys in 1973, nobody — especially Kleinsinger — expected the humble series to ever be approaching the half-century mark by now. But as of the end of February, Highlights in Jazz had its 46th anniversary concert with chef Kleinsinger in command and the usual reliable menu.

Stylistically, Kleinsinger’s shows have followed the same formula over the course of more than four decades: a theme, a lineup of top flight musicians and performances that pop them in and out in a variety of settings in much the same vein as a Norman Granz Jazz at the Philharmonic show.

However, what Highlights in Jazz is not is just another show. In the city that never sleeps, where you can hear live music any night of the week, you are guaranteed a different twist from the expected. It has been a formula for longevity. Think of it: it’s possible for someone to have attended that first Highlights in Jazz concert as a teenager and now be collecting Social Security.

The 46th anniversary do was programmed in the customary Kleinsinger tradition: strong soloists from the metropolitan region who also play well with others, or visiting out-of-towners who have room for
a gig while passing through. And of course, the customary “surprise guest” to round out the lineup.

Also, after all these years, being a repeat performer at a Kleinsinger concert has become a badge of honor (and often longevity) for the musician as well as a sign of popularity with the producer and his audience. Kleinsinger always seems to take equal pride in presenting HIJ veterans and introducing his audience to people with whom they’re not completely familiar.

On horns were tenor saxophonist Houston Person, clarinetist Ken Peplowski and trumpeter Warren Vaché. Pianist/chanteuse Daryl Sherman lent her voice to the proceedings while the rhythm section was pianist Lafayette Harris (subbing for the scheduled Norman Simmons), guitarist James Chirillo and bassist Boots Maleson.

No stranger to these parts (or his bandmates) was drummer/vibist Chuck Redd, the evening’s requisite “surprise guest.”

“I almost called it ‘The usual suspects,’” Kleinsinger quipped to the audience. Indeed, given his proclivity for giving clever names to shows and presenting comfortable, familiar swing, this event could have been very easily called “Typical Jack.”

The full band started with a nice, loping “Undecided,” which could very easily be considered an HIJ warhorse, as it’s one of those Swing Era standards that gives everyone room to play and an opportunity to warm up on at the same time.

Very much in the Granz tradition, it seems that everyone gets a little showcase in an HIJ concert. Houston Person’s deep tone and soulful soloing on “These Foolish Things” made him stand out from the band for his feature. James Chirillo’s performance of a Johnny Smith arrangement of “Golden Earing” was delicately executed but way too brief. [Smith’s 1967 Verve recording of the tune clocks in at a modest 2:59.]

Lafayette Harris got right to the point when his turn came, announcing “George Gershwin” he sat down at the piano for a trio rendition of “Who’s Got the Last Laugh?,” the epitome of in the pocket swing. Then it was Chuck Redd’s turn to demonstrate his versatility, stepping across the stage from the drums to the vibes for “Blues Walk” that also included some guitar comping that brought to mind longtime Highlights in Jazz performer Bucky Pizzarelli.

The first half of the concert ended with the band returning in delightful full force for “Honeysuckle Rose.” At that point in the show it seemed that the Kleinsinger-assembled band had been playing together for years.

The second half of the show featured the band in various permutations and vocalist Daryl Sherman. The addition of the talented vocalist gave new shadings to the concert, allowing for a different type of interplay, shifting from an octet to duos and trios. “Long Ago and Far Away,” with Sherman and the rhythm section — including guitarist Chirillo — allowed her to show off a voice reminiscent of Blossom Dearie, but with a...
deeper timbre. “Taking a Chance on Love,” besides featuring the vibes playing of Redd and being another entry from the American songbook, also allowed Sherman to pay tribute to one of her influences, Marlene VerPlanck.

“The Lorelei,” a duo with Sherman on voice and piano and Vaché on trumpet allowed the horn player to show off his well-cultivated sense of humor and charm, something that has become a hallmark of his performances. Appropriately enough, Vaché’s participation with Highlights in Jazz goes back several decades to the 1970s when he was a beardless youth.

Speaking of humor, Sherman probably knew what she was getting into when asking top-flight clarinetist Ken Peplowski “Do you know ‘I Love you’? “You’re the second person who asked me that tonight. The first one was Houston.”

Do you know “I Love you”? You’re the second person who asked me that tonight.

The full band reunited for the show’s finale, a Mildred Bailey-influenced lovely “Lover Come Back to Me” (with its seldom heard verse, Sherman explained). It’s another hallmark of a Highlights in Jazz concert that while you’ll often hear musicians you know performing songs you recognize, there will always be factoids interspersed concerning the music’s history.

Another hallmark of a Highlights in Jazz concert is a salute to a living musician. On May 16 at 8 pm the honoree will be trumpeter Randy Brecker, accompanied a selection of performers from groups consisting of “millennials” and “masters.”

The 2019 HIGJ series concludes on Thursday, June 20, at 8 pm with a show called “Remembering Erroll & Randy” featuring The Erroll Garner Project (Christian Sands, piano; Ulysses Owens, drums; and Luques Curtis, bass) and A Randy Weston Tribute (T.K. Blue, saxophone and the Weston Alumni Band: Alex Blake, bass; Neil Clarke, percussion; Steve Turre, trombone and the customary surprise guest).

All shows are at the Borough of Manhattan Community College Performing Arts Center, 199 Chambers Street, Manhattan. Ticket prices: $50 adults, $45 students.

To order tickets, send your check and a self-addressed stamped envelope to Highlights in Jazz, 7 Peter Cooper Rd., 11 E, New York, NY 10010.

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Multi-percussionist Chuck Redd ponders making the warmup transition from drums to vibes at the Highlights in Jazz anniversary concert.

Warren Vache and Daryl Sherman coordinate a duet during the sound check for the February Highlights in Jazz.

Pianist-singer Daryl Sherman warms up both her digits and vocal chords before Jack Kleinsinger’s HIJ concert.

— Photos by Mitchell Seidel