

NYC Jazz Pilgrimage Summary/Highlights

As most of you are aware, last weekend (10/1/06), I completed a week-long trip to the Jazz Mecca of the world, New York City (NYC). This was my first trip to NYC to specifically check out the historic Jazz clubs and current scene. While living on the east coast (Baltimore, Atlantic City), I made several trips to NYC to check out record stores. During this trip, I also took an opportunity to do some serious sight-seeing and to take in some of the wonderful cultural history of Harlem.

I've attached my final itinerary and would like to share with you the highlights of my trip: (For you non-Jazz fans, I beg your indulgence in the details)

Saturday (Day 1)

- My flight out of Oakland was delayed 75 minutes and almost caused me to miss my connecting flight in Atlanta. I guess when you hop off the plane and immediately check the kiosk, and it shows your connecting flight as 'Closed' while at the same time hearing your name over the P.A. system, it's not a good sign. Fortunately, I just made the connecting flight – the boarding gate, just two gates away, was just closing. Hmmmm... I wonder if my suitcase containing my dress clothes will make it???
- When I touched down in Newark, I found out that my suitcase did not make the flight (it was later delivered to my hotel). Oh well, it shouldn't be a problem going to a Jazz club (e.g., the historic Birdland, mind you) dressed like a bum – I'll soon find out!
- First stop: Birdland featuring a John Coltrane 80th Birthday Tribute, led by Joe Lovano (ts, ss) with Steve Kuhn (pn), Lonnie

Plaxico (bs), and Andrew Cyrille (dr). Special guest Henry Grimes (bs) joined the group midway during the set. Overall, nice set. Kuhn, Cyrille, and Grimes all played with Coltrane at one time. Although, you have to wonder with all of the great tenor saxophonists (over the age of 50), as well as Coltrane clones living in NYC, why Joe Lovano??? Had dinner there, food was very good!

- Second stop: Smoke featuring the Eric Reed (pn) Quartet with Gerald Cannon (bs), Willie Jones III (dr), and Stacy Dillard (young lion) (ts, ss). Great set – they really swung hard! During the set, Eric acknowledged the great drummer, Leroy Williams, and young lion, Jason Marsalis, as well as the daughter of famous Jazz singer Johnny Hartman in the house. Jason sat in on the final number. Eric, who followed Marcus Roberts in Wynton Marsalis' septet years ago, is an outstanding pianist!!! Before the set, I spoke briefly to Gerald Cannon and Jason Marsalis (youngest of Marsalis clan) outside. I last spoke to Gerald when he appeared at Yoshi's with Elvin Jones' Jazz Machine in May 2004, just days before Elvin passed away.

Jason told me that he had just moved to Brooklyn from New Orleans. I last saw him with his father, patriarch Ellis, at S.F. Jazz in March 2006 and with his brother Delfeayo (tb) at Yoshi's in August 2006 as part of an Elvin Jones Tribute performance.

Sunday (Day 2)

- Checked out two matinee plays in Greenwich Village before I hit the Jazz clubs. The first play, "Nixon's Nixon", was a fictional version of the secret meeting known to have taken place between President Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the White House on the eve of Nixon's resignation in August 1974. Very interesting play and well acted!
- The second play, "No Child...", performed by Nilaja Sun, was a

close look into modern-day New York City public education. During the play, Ms. Sun, a former teacher, instantly transformed herself into teachers, students, parents, administrators, janitors, and security guards who inhabit our public schools and are shaping the future of America. Outstanding performance!

- First stop: Blue Note featuring another John Coltrane 80th Birthday Tribute, led by McCoy Tyner (pn) with Pharoah Sanders (ts), Charnett Moffett (s), and Eric Gravatt. The group played tunes associated with the famous Coltrane Quartet (which featured Tyner) and the expanded group in later years, which also featured Sanders. Great set, however, only lasted ~53 minutes! Had dinner there, food was very good!
- Second stop: Smalls featuring Planet Jazz, a sextet including leader Spike Wilner (pn), Joe Magnarelli (tr), and Peter Bernstein (gt). Great set - they also really swung! Had a chance to chat with Joe and Peter outside in between sets. I had previously been communicating with Joe via e-mail regarding his outstanding co-op group, N.Y Hardbop Quintet (w/Jerry Weldon (ts)), and any new group recordings. There are no plans for a new recording. I last saw Peter with Dr. Lonnie Smith at S.J. Jazz Festival and with Anton Schwartz at Yoshi's both in August 2006. I missed seeing him at Stanford Jazz (same night as Kenny Burrell w/Gerald Wilson Big Band at Yoshi's).

Monday (Day 3)

- Took a walking tour of historic Harlem with Harlem Heritage Tours owner and home-grown product Neil Shoemaker. Past residents of Harlem, once called the 'Black Capitol of America', have included: W.E.B DuBois, Walter White (NAACP), Paul Robeson, Count Basie, Malcolm X, Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and Adam Clayton Powell. Before Neil arrived, I had a chance to meet Neil's assistant (and historian), Mr. Bill Miles, a

much older gentleman. It turns out that he's a long-time Harlem resident and an independent filmmaker, having produced 12 films over the years for PBS, has worked with media mogul Ted Turner, and is Spike Lee's mentor. He's also co-written two books about Black World War I Army veterans and NASA's Black astronauts, respectively. I mentioned to him my uncle's recent book, a Tuskegee Airman. Once Neil arrived, we began the tour. As I was walking the streets of Harlem and taking in the sights and sounds, I could clearly see that Harlem is a hustling and bustling community. Interestingly enough, as we were exiting the gates of a high-class, high-rise apartment called Sugar Hill, we ran into actor Danny Glover ('Color Purple', 'Lethal Weapon') as he was entering. Neil, a very fast talker, was quickly able to get Danny's office number for potential new business opportunities. Talk about being at the right place at the right time! Neil was on cloud nine for the rest of the afternoon. Also, while walking, I recognized Jazz organist Dr. Lonnie Smith just strolling along at 125th Ave. and Adam Clayton Powell Blvd. I introduced myself, told him that I had last seen him at Jazz at Pearl's in April 2006 and at the S.J. Jazz Festival in August 2006, and mentioned that I had planned to see him at Smoke on Tuesday. The walking tour was truly memorable, insightful, and educational!! I hadn't yet seen the last of Harlem!

- First stop: Dizzy's Coca Cola Club at JALC featuring Patrice Rushen (pn) with James Genus (bs) and Terri Lynne Carrington (ds). Dizzy's Club, located on the 5th floor of one of the Time Warner Center buildings, overlooks mid-town Manhattan facing southward - what a great view! By pure coincidence, I had the opportunity to share a table with NYC-based actress/singer/educator/journalist Mercy Monet. We had a very interesting conversation on the current Jazz scene. During the set, Patrice played a few tunes from her very first Jazz LP titled, 'Prelusions,' released in 1974. Overall, very good set. Willie Jones III also

showed up to hear the set and Wynton Marsalis made a brief appearance to speak to him. Had dinner there, food was very good!

- Second stop: Sweet Rhythm featuring The New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music jam session on Mondays. The school, begun in 1986, draws its faculty from NYC's renowned Jazz community. This night was the 20th anniversary celebration so many of its alumni and current students showed up to jam. Imagine the interchangeable rhythm section (pn, bs, dr) playing an up tempo Jazz standard ('Confirmation', 'Cherokee', 'Moment's Notice') with 15 folks lined up on the side of the stage with their respective axes, ready to step up, play their best solo over a few choruses, and step off to arousing applause, with each tune lasting 20 minutes. Well, you get the picture! I also had a chance to meet the famous Coltrane bassist Reggie Workman, who is on the faculty.
- Third stop: Zinc Bar featuring the Ron Affif (gt) Trio. Ron is an amazing straight-ahead Jazz guitarist! Following his late set on Mondays, he holds a jam session for all comers. On this night, who shows up (just to name a few): Roy Hargrove (tp), Maurice Brown (tp), Kenyatta Beasley (from New Orleans) (tp), and Teodross Avery (ts). Both sets outstanding, great solos, lots of burning! Had good chat with Teodross after the set.

Tuesday (Day 4)

- Started the day by taking a nice driving/sightseeing tour of the Bronx. Another hustling and bustling community. Also drove past the famous Yankee Stadium, flashing back to those amazing late-70s Reggie Jackson homerun blasts. Finished the afternoon by driving thru other parts of Harlem. For dinner, had Chinese food at upper-Manhattan carry-out restaurant. Very good food!
- First stop: Smoke featuring Dr. Lonnie Smith Trio with Adam

Rafferty (gt) and Willie Jones, III (dr). Lonnie knows how to burn and how to mellow out. Very nice set!

- Second stop: Village Vanguard featuring Clark Terry (tp, fl) with David Glasser (as), Don Friedman (pn), Marcus McLaurine (bs), and Sylvia Cuenca (from San Jose) (dr), and special guest Clifford Adams (tb). I recognized Clifford's name from some 1970s Charles Earland LPs.

Even though Mr. Terry, now 85 years old, had trouble getting around, he sounded great on flugelhorn (he did not play trumpet during this set nor did he 'mumble') and still displayed his sense of humor. He and his band sounded great on mostly swing tunes. He can still swing!!!

Wednesday (Day 5)

- Started the day by taking the tour of the historic Apollo Theatre in Harlem. The tour was given by the very dynamic, funny, and personable Billy Mitchell, Group Sales/Tour Manager.

I had communicated with him earlier via e-mail and telephone and he had invited me to join two other large groups for the tour. The tour is actually a walk through the lobby of the theatre and sitting down in the actual theatre, originally built in 1914. After we sat down, he formally recognized the two large groups (both were senior groups (full of energy/life) from nearby areas) and then me (e.g., 'Is a Kenneth Cobb from California here?'). I responded, "I live near Oakland but am originally from Detroit!" I guess I had to represent!!!

During his background/history talk on the Apollo Theatre, which is currently undergoing a \$7.5 billion renovation, he pointed out that there are actually two productions regarding the Apollo: (a) Showtime At The Apollo, and (b) Amateur Night. Amateur Night has occurred (and still does) every Wednesday night since

1934. Showtime is taped two weekends a year (Sep/Jan) and first appeared on TV in 1987. It turned out that Showtime would be taping this weekend. At the end, Billy asked the audience to put on their own 'Amateur Night' (no booing aloud, of course). So three men and three women volunteers sang, danced, and told (clean) jokes. Indeed, fun was had by all! One could easily observe a 'joie de vivre' among these 'mature' folks. After the show, I asked Billy about Howard 'Sandman' Sims, (fine!) KeKe Shepard, and the older lady who sat in the front row and acted a *% fool. It turns out that Mr. Sims passed in 2003 at age 86. Ms. Shepard left the show a few years to pursue other opportunities. Billy did not know what happened to the older lady. Billy then invited me to attend the taping of this season's first show on Friday. I said sure! As I left the theatre, Harry Belafonte, actor/social activist, had just arrived in front to film a video. Of course, he was being mobbed by women of all ages.

- I then went to see the highly anticipated play, 'The Color Purple,' that everyone had been mentioned, on Broadway. The play was outstanding!!! If you every get the opportunity to travel to NYC, you gotta see this play.
- I then did some serious walking, from the Broadway Theater, down Broadway, thru Times Square (what a sight!), down 42nd St., down 8th Ave., around Madison Square Garden on 34th St. (home of Ali-Frazier I), over to Park Ave., and up to the Kitano Hotel at 38th St. for a Jazz performance featuring the Orrin Evans Trio (pn). Well it turned out that he had canceled earlier in the week due to last minute travel plans (remember that name!).
- First stop: Iridium featuring Sean Jones (tp) and his group. When the band hits the stage, guess who sits down at the piano, none other than Orrin Evans! The quintet sounded great! Sean, a young lion, is originally from Youngstown, OH. Tia Fuller (as), who appears on all three of his CDs, replaced the alto sax player

on a few tunes. Had dinner there, food was very good!

- Second stop: Minton's Playhouse featuring a jam session by a group led by Dave Gibson (dr), Robert Lanham (brother of Joey DeFrancesco's drummer Byron) (as), and Waldron Ricks (from Detroit) (tp). Bertha Hope, widow of famous Jazz pianist Elmo Hope, sat in on a few tunes. Again, a few walk-ins had a lot to say!!! Quite a jam session! I also had the opportunity to meet Rome Neal, an actor who has written and performed a one-man play titled, 'Monk,' about the life and times of Thelonious Monk. The music was scored by Bill Lee, father of Spike Lee. I purchased the DVD from Rome.

Thursday (Day 6)

- Started the day by visiting Ground Zero, the site of the 9/11 attack in NYC. The first thing that hits you is the huge hole in the ground that once housed six large buildings, including the Twin Towers. Walked around the perimeter and visited the memorial building, which houses videos, photos, audio tapes, memorabilia, clothing, etc. Saw the display with the badges of the 343 firefighters who lost their lives. Whole scene very somber and very moving.
- First stop: Jazz Standard featuring Danilo Perez Trio (pn) with Ben Street (bs) and Antonio Sanchez (dr). Group played a few originals and a few standards. Danilo formally recognized Jazz great Andrew Hill (pn) in the audience. Very nice set! Had dinner there, food was very good!
- Second stop: Jazz Gallery featuring a Kenny Kirkland Tribute led by Jeff 'Tain' Watts (dr). Kenny Kirkland (pn) died in 1998. Both Kenny and Jeff, along with Branford Marsalis, were part of Wynton's original quintet before the brothers split up. For the tribute, Jeff added Marcus Strickland (ts, ss) to his young trio. Very nice set!

- Third stop: Sweet Rhythm featuring jam session led by Duane Eubanks (tp) and his trio. A few walk-ins again had a lot to say!!! In the club, I thought I recognized Norman Connors, drummer and famous R&B producer from the 1970s (e.g., Phyllis Hyman, Jean Carne, Michael Henderson, Starship Orchestra, etc.). It was him, so I introduced myself. He's in the process of relocating from L.A. to NYC to continue record producing. I guess it's a small world!

Friday (Day 7)

- I had front (3rd row) and center seats for the taping of the first show of the season. The host this year is someone named Whoopi Goldberg!!! The featured guest for the first show was a rapper named Jibbs who now has a tune out called 'Chain Hung Low.' As he was performing, I didn't have clue what he was saying. He did, however, remind me of LL Cool J performing 'I'm Bad' back in 1985. At least I could understand LL. The show was pretty entertaining. So look out for a Brother when the season begins.
- Had an early dinner at the famous Sylvia's Soul Food restaurant a few blocks away. As the story goes, back during NYC Mayor Ed Koch's tenure in the 1970s and 80s, word got out that on Sunday evenings, he and his security detail would leave Gracie Mansion, head up to Harlem, spend a few hours, then return to the mayor's residence. The press and public thought that perhaps the Mayor was having an affair with a woman in Harlem. It turns out that Hizzoner was treating himself, his security detail, and specially invited friends to good ole' soul food at Sylvia's. When word got out, it put Sylvia's on the map, so to speak. For the record, I had BBQ beef ribs (her BBQ sauce is sold in stores), sweet potatoes, potato salad, greens, and corn bread – needless to say, I threw down!!! On the way out, I met Ms. Sylvia and told how great her food was.

- Checked out the Jazz Museum in Harlem, a four-year old establishment dedicated to fostering the spirit and heritage of Jazz music as a living, breathing entity that looks as far into the future as it does into the past. The museum offers free Jazz courses, has a youth Jazz band, and introduces high school students to the vibrancy of Jazz. The museum's co-director is Christian McBride. Very nice artwork, photographs, videos, literature, souvenirs, etc.
- Final stop: Cecil's (in NJ) featuring the Ralph Peterson Trio (dr). The proprietor of Cecil's is Jazz drummer and record producer Cecil Brooks, III. Ralph appeared with two young brothers (Luques (bass) and Zaccai (piano) Curtis) who hail from Connecticut. I believe that they're both students! (The bassist appeared with Sean Jones at the Iridium.) Look out for these two. Ralph, one-time Wynton Marsalis drummer, has always been an outstanding (powerful) drummer. He also plays a pretty nice trumpet! During the last set, Tia Fuller (as), a trumpet player, and a tenor sax player (who I saw at Sweet Rhythm the night before) joined in a jam session. Also present in the audience was famous drummer T.S. Monk (and Thelonious' son), who turned down Ralph's invitation to sit in on the drums. Overall, very nice sets!

Well, after a week of great Jazz music in NYC, the two impressions that I am most left with are: (1) the level of musicianship is extremely high (e.g., everyone is good!), and (2) don't judge a book by its cover (e.g., jam sessions).

After completing this wonderful first pilgrimage, I've decided to make this an annual event. Next time, I'll try to get to Brooklyn and Queens. Who knows – maybe I'll just relocate to Harlem one day... Take care!!!

(October 6, 2006)