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SWINGING THROUGH HISTORY

By Josef Woodard

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On tour to promote a new album and the 70th anniversary of Blue Note Records, the all-star Blue Note 7 will stop at UCSB's Campbell Hall

IN CONCERT

BLUE NOTE 7

When: 8 p.m. Wednesday

Where: UCSB's Campbell Hall

Cost: \$40 general, \$18 UCSB Students

Information: 893-3535,

artsandlectures.sa.ucsb.edu



At a time when the fate of the jazz recording industry is up in the air, cast to the winds of changing technology and a new emphasis on independent labels, Blue Note Records is a rarity. Other major labels apart from Concord 'have curtailed jazz operations or slipped into paler, commercial facsimiles of "jazz," and/or relied on archival material.

But Blue Note Records, an American institution currently in its 70th year of operations, boasts both an awesome repository of archival recordings and an ongoing commitment if more moderate than before 'to new jazz releases. It helps, of course, that the label has padded its coffers with massive success stories like Norah Jones.

Starting this month, an all-star group known as the Blue Note 7 is hopping on the tour bus and criss-crossing America in celebration of the label's 70-year milestone, stopping at UCSBs Campbell Hall on Wednesday. With this highly-recommended show, the 2009 Santa Barbara jazz calendar gets its official kickoff.

Serving in a capacity as musical director of the ensemble, appropriately, is pianist Bill Charlap, widely considered in the upper echelons of great living pianists and a Blue Note artist himself since 2000. On tour and with a newly-released album called 'Mosaic: A Celebration of Blue Note Records,' the task at hand for this band (which also includes trumpeter Nicholas Payton, saxophonists Ravi Coltrane and Steve Wilson, guitarist Peter Bernstein, bassist Peter Washington and drummer Lewis Nash) was to re-arrange and update classic tunes from deep in the Blue Note catalogue. Music of Joe Henderson, Herbie Hancock, Thelonious Monk, Horace Silver and others from the Blue Note library have been lovingly and inventively retooled.

Charlap, an articulate chap with a fairly encyclopedic musical knowledge, recently spoke on the phone from the proverbial road. They were wending their way through winter weather in Washington State toward a date in Yakima, a gathering of gifted and flexible jazz musicians bringing their musical merchandise to America the old-fashioned way, live and in-person.

In time-honored fashion, jazz musicians were doing it this way 70 years ago, around the time Blue Note founder Alfred Lion started his little label that could.

Being a bandleader for a group this size, this is something of a unique context, a departure for you, isn't it?

Well, almost all of what I've done as a leader has been with my trio. Now we have the augmentation of the horns, but it's not that I've never played with horns or with guitar, either.

In a sense, better than saying "leader" or "musical director," I'd rather say I'm the organizing force, because this really is a band with seven possible leaders at any time. But I'm here to help organize all the different material and sets and things like that.

The group's new album heeds an interesting concept, archival in a way, but also very much about being in the moment and bringing new ideas and arrangements to the table. Is that fair to say?

Yes, I guess the thing is that this material is, in a sense, one of the great catalogues of all recorded jazz in history. When you think about the Blue Note catalogue, it's not just the wonderful packaging and the wonderful recorded sound of (engineer) Rudy Van Gelder. Most importantly, of course, it's the musicians and the compositions, as well.

Alfred Lion was very supportive of these great leader-composers, people like Joe Henderson and Kenny Dorham, Horace Silver and Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner. Many of them have written what are some of the most important pieces of repertoire in our canon, equal in their own way to blues rhythm changes and the great popular American songwriters. They are the pinnacle of the best of modern jazz, with the feeling of the blues and a look towards the future and the relationship to the past and the present, all at the same time.

The way we see it is that we're playing repertoire, which is by many of our musical heroes. The idea is that we're playing the repertoire, but it's not a repertory band, if you will. We're playing this music as we play it in 2009, and approach it our own way. Although when you're playing compositions of this strength, you don't want to lose the essence of the composition, because they're already so strong that they don't need to be re-composed, but perhaps rethought for our purposes, in terms of arranging.

We're adding our own personal touches, as well. Certainly, in Nicholas Payton's arrangement of (Joe Henderson's) 'Inner Urge,' that's a complete rethinking of the piece. That's a case of how far it can go. But it's open. We play and direct it in the moment, as we would in 2009 and as we do, because that's what playing jazz is all about.

You're in the position of having been a Blue Note artist for many years now. This must have been an unusual task for you, possibly something like a research project for you, to delve into the vaults.

I would say it's less of a research project than just the kind of thing that sounded exciting to me naturally, because and I think I speak for all of us here this is music we cut our teeth on, music that we've loved listening to and are inspired by for our whole lives. We already knew it in our heads. It wasn't so much searching the vaults. The vaults were between our ears, from our own experience.

One of the nice things in this band is that it has experience. We're not young lions, but were also not elder statesmen. We've all had the experience of playing with as many of the major forces in modern jazz as are around today, but we've also all had the experience of playing as leaders. In this band, you have seven potential leaders and the beautiful thing about it, though, is that everybody plays as a team player at the same time. It really is a wonderful combination.

If you think about those fantastic recordings on Blue Note examples like "The Real McCoy" with Joe Henderson and Elvin Jones and Ron Carter, or Blakey and the Messengers with Doug Watkins, Hank Mobley and Kenny Dorham and Horace Silver it's about one thing musically, the word is chemistry. There is incredible chemistry there, and I think that's one of the things that you can't manufacture. It's like when you meet someone who you become friends with. Usually, that chemistry is there right from the get-go. The same thing is true in a musical group, whether it's the Emerson String Quartet or the Cannonball Adderley Sextet.

It's about chemistry, and I think that happens immediately. I think it happened immediately in this band, so that's one of the lucky things. I had a talk recently with the great arranger and composer Johnny Mandel.

One of the things he was talking about what makes an iconic classic. We were talking about a specific album. You could have everything in place the right repertoire, the right artist, the right recording studio, the right producer, the right musicians just everything in place. But you still need this one other element, and that element is luck.

Incredibly, there are so many of those iconic Blue Note albums that seem to have had that magical element. God did a little dance around them.

I think we've been very lucky as a group to have that chemistry from the get-go. But it makes sense, because we've all played with each other in different aggregates over the years. All of these seven players have had experience with each other on the bandstand for a good long period. So it kind of makes sense, in a way, as the Blue Note albums had rhythm sections and soloists who often appeared on each others' albums. That has been the case for us. Most of us are in the New York area and Nicholas is from New Orleans, of course.

But we've known each other for many years and we've had a chance to create that chemistry in various groups. Now, we're doing it together as a seven-headed hydra.

Of course, this project is timed with the labels 70th anniversary. Is one of the secondary functions of this project and this tour to deliver the message of the Blue Note catalogue to the public?

I think it's not so much that. We're very proud to deliver the message of the Blue Note catalogue, but we're delivering the message of the music and the musicians that we love, and playing jazz with each other, with what playing this music means to us. Certainly, we're very proud to be associated with Blue Note and Blue Note Records, but the message of music is something that we try to deliver anytime and anywhere that we play. That's not to sound Pollyanna about it, but it's quite true.

I think that the honor of playing this music, and of thinking about many of our heroes, some of whom are still here and very vital McCoy Tyner, Bobby Hutcherson, Wayne Shorter, Horace Silver is still here. Certainly, Wayne and Bobby Hutcherson and McCoy Tyner are extremely vital and at the top of their game, still. So it's an honor to play their music and an honor to pay tribute to them and what they've given to us, given to the entire world as a gift.