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**October 7, 2015**

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Jazz

## **KCJO swings hard in season opener**

By **Jessie Riggins** Wed, Oct 07, 2015



“A Night at the Cotton Club!” was presented by the Kansas City Jazz Orchestra on Friday, October 2nd in Helzberg Hall. It was a provocative start to their upcoming year, focusing on the music of Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and other famous jazz musicians whose careers were pushed into the limelight by performing at the controversial Cotton Club between 1923

and 1935.

Even though they were performing inside the beautiful Helzberg Hall, the setting was intimate, with the big band downstage, a projector screen and curtain behind the band, and dancers seated at tables to the left and right. Audience members felt like they were a part of the club experience. The projector screen added to the atmosphere well, showing slides of not only original program pages but photographs from the height of the Cotton Club's fame.

The band kicked off the night with Ellington's *Rockin' in Rhythm*, which featured Mark Cohick on the lead clarinet line. Cohick is a wonderful instrumentalist that moved with ease from his bari sax to many other woodwinds all throughout the evening's performance. This number (and many others) also featured guest dancers from 627 Stomp, a local organization that takes pride in dedicating themselves to preserving, promoting, and celebrating Kansas City Swing Dance and jazz history.

The evening had many remarkable guest artists. Artistic Director Clint Ashlock's arrangement of *Drop Me Off in Harlem* spotlighted local jazz trumpeter Hermon Mehari. Mehari is well known throughout the Kansas City area and international jazz circles as both a performer and jazz educator. Mehari's solo, as well as most of the night's solos, did a magnificent job of staying true to and honoring the originals while blending it with each performer's own “Kansas City” style. Duke Ellington focused on his soloists' individual voices, and the Kansas City Jazz Orchestra as well as their solo guests magnificently did the same.

Three outstanding Kansas City vocalists also performed with the band throughout the night. David Basse, who lended his voice on *Drop Me Off in Harlem* and *Minnie the Moocher*, Ron Gutierrez, featured on the Sinatra classic *World on a String* (after which Clint Ashlock remarked how Gutierrez could “Sing the hell out of that stuff!”), *I Can't Give You Anything But Love*, and *Doin' the New Low Down*, and the beautiful Kathleen Holeman setting her pipes to *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, *Stormy Weather*, the timeless torch song *Stardust*, and *Get Happy*.

The Kansas City Jazz Orchestra is composed of some of the most prominent jazz performers and educators from the Kansas City area, and there were numerous solos from beginning to end that did not disappoint. Harold Arlen's ballad *Ill Wind* featured a bewitching solo from alto saxophonist Dave Chael, as well as solos from bari saxophonist Mark Cohick and trumpeter David Aaberg. Earlie Bragg's plunger trombone solo during *Black and Tan Fantasy* was right on point with Joe “Tricky Sam” Nanton's, and again while blending a bit of his own Kansas City style into his trombone solo on *Black Beauty*. *Creole Love Call* featured tenor saxophonist Doug Talley, trombonist Paul Robert, Mark Cohick on the lead clarinet line, and all of the classic scoops and smears expected from this great Ellington chart. KCJO is truly a prolific ensemble, and there were several other delightful solos from trumpeter Steve Molloy, trombonists Steve Dekker, Jeff Hamer, and Paul Roberts, saxophonists Bob Long and Brad Gregory, and a rhythm section of guitarist Rod Fleeman, pianist Charles Williams, bassist James Albright, and percussionists John Kizilarmut and Sam Wisman “in the pocket” all night long.

Even Artistic Director and Bandleader Clint Ashlock jumped in on the action, providing some wonderful trumpet solos on *Minnie the Moocher* and *Stardust*, displaying not only his wide range of talent while programming music, but his phenomenal talent on the trumpet as well.

Ashlock's arrangement of *Black Beauty* was a perfect way to end the evening, and the band brought back the shout section for an encore.

The night was gratifying for Swing Band and Kansas City jazz enthusiasts alike. The combination of original charts and new arrangements was wonderful, and the talented personnel on stage had a magnificent ability to blend their own voice and style while still honoring those greats of the past.

## **REVIEW:**

### **Kansas City Jazz Orchestra**

#### ***A Night at the Cotton Club!***

Friday, October 2, 2015

Helzberg Hall, Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts

1601 Broadway Blvd., Kansas City, MO

For more information, visit [www.kcjazzorchestra.org/](http://www.kcjazzorchestra.org/)

Top Photo: Kansas City Jazz Orchestra