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Jazz giants in their 80s prove age-defying gifts are still intact

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By Howard Reich

Nearly 50 years ago, the virtuoso clarinetist Buddy DeFranco joined forces with the brilliant composer Nelson Riddle to release an unusually pictorial orchestral recording: "Cross Country Suite."

Over the weekend, DeFranco -- this time joined by Jeff Lindberg's Chicago Jazz Orchestra -- revived that score, to great effect and robust response.

Many in Northwestern University's Thorne Auditorium, which was nearly filled Sunday afternoon, probably realized the significance of the occasion, as well as its central challenge: Could DeFranco, at 84, still finesse a work as musically intricate and technically demanding as this?

The man settled that question with his opening flurry of notes, pushing tempos and devouring fast-flying passages that would have undone many a younger clarinetist. Moreover, that signature DeFranco tone -- slightly acidic and utterly unsentimental -- sounded as crisply identifiable as ever.

"Cross Country Suite" reaffirmed Riddle's gifts as writer, even if it also showed him borrowing from orchestral classics. If the hustle and bustle of the "Metropolis" movement owed a debt to Gershwin's "An American in Paris," if "El Camino Real" never could have been written without Ravel's "Bolero," there still was much to admire in the jazz impulses of these and other movements. DeFranco's hauntingly lyrical playing on "Smoky Mountain Country" and epic cadenza in the "Longhorn" finale ennobled this work.

Later in the afternoon, trumpeter Roy Hargrove collaborated poetically with the CJO in Lindberg's adaptation of the adagio movement of Joaquin Rodrigo's "Concierto de Aranjuez," which incorporated elements of the iconic Miles Davis-Gil Evans recording "Sketches of Spain."

Symphony Center

Like bookends, the two headliners who opened the Jazz at Symphony Center season over the weekend represented opposite ends of a chronological spectrum.

Octogenarian drummer Roy Haynes, after all, ranks among the most richly pedigreed of jazz musicians, having worked with bebop originator Charlie Parker in the late 1940s and '50s and practically everyone else since. The vibist Stefon Harris, meanwhile, epitomizes a generation of musicians who emerged in the 1990s and have been bringing new vitality to jazz.

Haynes, who titled a 2004 recording "Fountain of Youth," seemed to defy the passage of time, his physical bearing as loose and elastic as his rhythms were taut and aggressive.

Leading a quartet of younger musicians Friday night in Orchestra Hall, he sounded every bit as forceful and dynamic as he has in several decades' worth of appearances in Chicago.

Harris opened the evening leading a nonet in music from his CD "African Tarantella: Dances with Duke," a reconceptualization of music from Duke Ellington's orchestral suites.

Though Harris' virtuosity on vibraphone is well-established, this project illuminated Harris' talent with a pen, for its translucent scoring attested to Harris' keen ear for subtly shaded instrumental color.

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