

# CJO, Feinberg Theater prove to be a good fit

BY HOWARD REICH

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Every organization needs a home, and it's just possible that Jeff Lindberg's Chicago Jazz Orchestra has found one.

On Saturday evening, the CJO, which has worked practically every venue in town since its founding in 1978, played its first concert at the Feinberg Theater of the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership, on South Michigan Avenue.

Considering the visual beauty and sonic warmth of the room, as well as the high-profile downtown location, it's a wonder the CJO never landed here before. Ditto other Chicago musical ensembles, which long have yearned for a top-notch, midsize concert space downtown. At 400 seats, the Feinberg is a bit small to ideally fit that description, but it suited the CJO handsomely.

Certainly the Spertus' gleaming design and the Feinberg's plush accommodations reflect a degree of elegance that the CJO always has sought to convey. This band revels in ultrasophisticated music of Count Basie and Duke Ellington, among others, the Feinberg fitting the ensemble's elegant aesthetic like a glove.

Better still, the orchestra was well served by the acoustics of the room, most notably in Billy Strayhorn's "Chelsea Bridge," played early in the program.

Though offered as a tip-of-the-hat to this year's Strayhorn centennial, the performance spoke most eloquently about the interrelationship between this band and this space. Tenor saxophonist Eric Schneider's steeped-in-blue solos filled every corner of the room, while the CJO provided precisely the ethereal, translucent ensemble textures that Strayhorn's score demands. Orchestral details rang out lucidly, even at the most hushed dynamic levels.

Most of the evening, however, focused less on the ensemble and more on its guest soloist, pianist Monty Alexander. It has been too many years since Alexander — who used to play the Jazz Showcase frequently — has been back in Chicago. His performance reminded us of what we've been missing.

For starters, there's the Jamaican undertow of much of his music, the pianist always having embraced the rhythmic cadences of his native country. Add to this his obvious veneration of the virtuosic piano traditions of Oscar Peterson and others, and you have a pianist whose mixture of cultures made him a "world music" champion long before the term became ubiquitous.

In Alexander's "Harrison Come and Gone," he opened with a big, concertlike introduction redolent of Edward Grieg, albeit with Caribbean inflections. Before long, Alexander's keyboard eruptions were being punctuated by buoyant lines from the CJO horns, plus bebop-tinged solos from CJO players Scott Burns on tenor saxophone and Victor Garcia on trumpet. The fiery call-and-response passages between Alexander and the CJO brass were high points of the evening.

Elsewhere in the program, Alexander dipped into stride-piano technique on his "You Can See" and reveled in two-fisted chordal tremolos on an earthy blues. He played piano and melodies jubilantly in "King Tubby Meets the Rockers Uptown," as explicit a reference to his Jamaican roots as any on the program.

And because of Alexander's acquaintanceship with Frank Sinatra in Miami in the 1960s, the pianist offered a centennial tribute to Ol' Blue Eyes that included a gorgeously re-harmonized, rhythmi-

cally recalibrated version of "In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning." In "Come Fly With Me," Alexander ventured far from the original, even as the CJO quoted Billy May's famous orchestration.

It's true that, for most of this program, the CJO was underutilized, because nearly the entire focus was on Alexander (who was deftly accompanied by bassist Hassan Ash-Shakar and CJO drummer George Fludes). At the same time, though, this made for an uncharacteristic and, therefore, surprising CJO program.

But maybe that's a clever way to test out a potential new home — trying something different. It worked.

The Chicago Jazz Orchestra will perform "Mingus & Maynard: The Music of Charles Mingus and Maynard Ferguson," at 7:30 p.m. May 20 in the Feinberg Theater of Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership, 610 S. Michigan Ave.; visit [chicagojazzorchestra.org](http://chicagojazzorchestra.org)



CHICAGO JAZZ ORCHESTRA

Freeman, shown in 2014, performed at the Green Mill Jazz Club on Friday night.

## Guitarist George Freeman at 88

Birthday celebrations don't get much more roaring — or inspiring — than the festivities at the Green Mill Jazz Club on Friday night.

Guitarist George Freeman, kid brother of the late saxophonist Von Freeman, marked his 88th before a packed house of enthusiastic admirers.

"People have more fun than anybody!" Freeman quipped to his fans, before setting out to prove it.

Joined by Chicago guitarist Mike Alemanza, who has been Freeman's musical foil in recent years, the elder musician played in a stripped-down style that showed plenty of fervor. He may have thrown off fewer notes than in earlier days, but the ones he played were well chosen.

The band, which also included Hammond B-3 organ master Pete Benson and visiting drum veteran Bernard "Pretty" Purdie, opened with a gritty blues. It gave Freeman ample opportunity to fire off repeated notes that generated pungent dissonance with the music swirling around him.

In another, up-tempo blues, Freeman showed alacrity of thought in shaping his phrases and an unmistakable joyousness of spirit. The laughing phrases of his coda appeared to sum up his mood.

In the set's sole ballad, Freeman produced soft, silvery lines that quickly brought the capacity audience to a hush. The guitarist's unexpected note choices and surprisingly delicate melodic ornaments affirmed his powers of control and invention.

Freeman gathered momentum as the evening proceeded, eventually playing fairly complex lines in unison with Alemanza, who went out of his way to keep the spotlight on the night's honoree.

"We might be up here all night," Freeman said toward the end of the set, which, thankfully, was recorded.

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