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Swinging From the First Note

In Its Inaugural Year, the Blue Note Jazz Festival Is Already a Juggernaut

By Will Friedwald

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"To the Blue Note please, and step on it!"

Even though other high-profile clubs have opened in the city since 1981, the Blue Note, on West Third Street, remains the one jazz venue where any cab driver will can you without the assistance of a more specific address. It may also be the only club where the coat check is often stuffed with luggage:

"Tourists fly in from Europe and come straight from the airport," said the owner and founder, Danny Bensusan.



Coincidentally, the club's 30th anniversary arrives at a time when George Wein, who has mounted major mainstream jazz festivals in New York for nearly 40 years, has no festival planned. So the time seemed right to try something new.



"We wanted to do something special for the anniversary," said Steve Bensusan, Danny's son and the president of the Blue Note Entertainment Group, "and we realized that it's a perfect moment to expand and create this Blue Note Jazz Festival."

For the inaugural event, the club booked nearly 100 shows that will reach across the city, spanning the month of June beginning Wednesday. ("It just grew and grew," Steve Bensusan said). No other presenter in town, with the exception of Jazz at Lincoln Center, could mount anything on this scale. But the Bensusans have a distinct advantage: Besides the 250-capacity Blue Note, they also own the Highline Ballroom and B.B. King's Blues Club & Grill. While the three-room Bensusan "circuit" could constitute a festival unto itself, the new event is also presenting shows at the Beacon Theatre, Town Hall, Terminal 5, JaLC's Rose Hall and other spots around the city.

"We're trying to gear the artists toward the type of room that they usually play—for instance, there will be more blues and R&B at B.B. King's," Mr. Bensusan said. "And there will be more experimental, hip-hop-slash-jazz stuff and new guitar players at Mercury lounge."

Mr. Bensusan, who plans to make this an annual event, noted that next year the club will recruit sponsors. "I'm envisioning it as more of a festival, rather than a collection of shows around town,"

he said. To that end, he hopes eventually to anchor it with a central, day-long outdoor concert, à la Newport on Governor's Island.

But even in this inaugural year, the Blue Note is presenting more acts and showcases than any one person could hope to see. Here are a few recommendations, culled from a handful of genres and styles, to get you started:

HEADLINERS

Dee Dee Bridgewater

Town Hall (June 24)

The extroverted, upbeat Ms. Bridgewater may seem an unlikely soul mate for Billie Holiday, who, in her later years presented herself as the Dark Lady of a Thousand Sorrows. Yet Ms. Bridgewater's "To Billie With Love" is an inspired meeting of two surprisingly kindred spirits, as she re-inhabits Holiday standards like "Lover Man" (done in a fast 3/4) and even Lady Day esoterica like "Your Mother's Son In Law." If you can't get in, you might try the colorful Brazilian stylist Milton Nascimento on the same night at Rose Hall.

LEGENDARY BEBOPPERS

Lee Konitz

The Blue Note (June 1-5)

Dave Brubeck

The Blue Note (June 13-15)

It's an argument I wouldn't want to get in the middle of. Who's playing better today: 83-year-old Lee Konitz, or 90-year-old Dave Brubeck? Mr. Konitz is appearing with Bill Frisell, Gary Peacock and Joey Baron, and Mr. Brubeck is backed by his terrific "regular" quartet, with Michael Moore, Randy Jones and the amazing "singing" saxophonist Bobby Militello—one of the best groups that the keyboard legend has ever had. It's just too bad they're not appearing together: Messrs. Brubeck and Konitz haven't teamed up since their wonderful duet on "Don't Get Around Much Anymore" in 1974.

VETERAN VOCALISTS

Jon Hendricks

The Blue Note (June 27-29)

Mr. Hendricks is unchallenged as jazz's greatest singer-songwriter—the man who proved more than anyone that jazz is a lyrical expression as much as a musical one. Annie Ross, his co-star from the greatest jazz vocal group of all time, will join him for these nights to delve into the brilliant canon of Lambert, Hendricks and Ross. As a bonus, on June 29 teen prodigy Nikki Yanofsky will open the show with her astonishing impression of Ella Fitzgerald. And on June 23, Jimmy Scott will show why he's still regarded as the Grandfather of Soul at his 85th birthday celebration.

LATIN JAZZ

El Gran Combo

Lehman Center for the Performing Arts (June 10)

The Lehman Center is an enormous auditorium way up in the Bronx, one well loved and supported by the Hispanic community. If there's any band that can fill this cavernous space and rock the joint, it's this "combo" from Puerto Rico, one of the signature ensembles of the entire salsa movement. For an event with more of a jazz edge, trombonist Conrad Herwig brings "The Latin Side of John Coltrane" to the Blue Note on June 30, which is worth catching just for the presence of special guest Joe Lovano.

BASIC BLUES

The Fabulous Thunderbirds

B.B. King's (June 20)

Roomful of Blues

B.B. King's (June 14)

How do you like your blues? If it's urban and streetwise, you're likely a fan of Roomful of Blues, which will appear with Texas gunslinger Johnny Winter. If the deep country blues is your "thang," you've probably already bought a ticket for The Fabulous Thunderbirds. ROB is sophisticated yet gritty, the kind of blues you could bring a date to hear, whereas TFT has to wipe the mud (and other stuff) off its boots before it comes inside. ROB bumps and grinds to a shuffle beat in the grand tradition of Louis Jordan, while TFT just plain rocks out.

THE GREAT AMERICAN SONGBOOK

Brian Wilson Reimagines Gershwin

Highline Ballroom (June 11-13)

Talk about "Good Syncopations!" This show, which takes its name from Mr. Wilson's 2010 album, more than qualifies as truth in advertising: It sounds like a mash-up of the Beach Boys and the Jazz Age's greatest songwriter, not least on Mr. Wilson's doo-woppy "I've Got a Crush on You," with 16th-note triplets. On June 29 at the Highline, the Roaring '20s style Ghost Train Orchestra is at the center of a vaudeville show celebrating the classic cartoons of the early talkie era, featuring jugglers and burlesque queens. We'll have fun-fun-fun until Daddy takes our "Rhythm" away.