

MUSIC REVIEW | ALI JACKSON

Bops, Hums and Pings, Turned Into Jazz

By Nate Chinen

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The jazz drummer Ali Jackson generates a subtle but irresistible force when he plays, making even the smallest gestures advance his agenda of locomotion. Countless times during a crowded late set on Tuesday, in his first of two nights at Jazz Standard, he caught the ear with seemingly errant details—the ping of a stick against the bell of his ride cymbal, or the tight, airless hum of a press roll on his snare—that slyly pulled a listener deeper into the groove. His performance, with a five-piece band, stretched to about an hour and a half. It went by quickly.

Mr. Jackson, from Detroit, is best known for his association with Wynton Marsalis, in whose groups he provides reliable horsepower. Here he opened the set with “Phryzzinian Man,” a calmly cryptic theme from “Black Codes (From the Underground),” the landmark post-bop album that Mr. Marsalis made in 1985.

It was a pledge of allegiance, set at a fascinating distance. “This is from the ’80s,” Mr. Jackson said, introducing it with a grin. “A long, long time ago.” (He was born in 1976.)



Ali Jackson performing in his five-piece band at Jazz Standard on Tuesday night.

G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

In his current band Mr. Jackson smartly modifies the conventional jazz quintet format, enlisting a trombonist, Vincent Gardner, instead of a trumpeter. The other members of the group are Wayne Escoffery, on tenor and soprano saxophones; Aaron Goldberg, on piano; and Ben Wolfe, on bass. They worked with collegial efficiency, pairing modern harmony with blues inflection and dropping the odd allusion to the gospel church.

On “Midnight Silence,” a shadowy waltz by Kenny Kirkland, the group sounded muted but loose, seeking out melancholy spaces. The song faded into a solo interlude, first Mr. Jackson, in a textural mode, and then Mr. Wolfe, in a Charles Mingus holler. This led into “Open Strings,” an original meditation with faintly West African undertones.

The set closed with “Wheelz Keep Rollin,’ ” the Motown-inspired title track from Mr. Jackson’s new self-released album. But its highlight was a pair of tunes by Mr. Goldberg. “Unstablemates,” a take on the Benny Golson standard “Stablemates,” featured strong work from Mr. Gardner, exuding boppish

precision. And it was a generous showcase for Mr. Escoffery, who began with a row of oblique intervals, shifted to a billowing double time and pulled back into hard-bop blues mode, evoking Hank Mobley. The rhythm section was mischievous, with bass and drums implying different rates of metabolism.

On OAM's Blues, Mr. Jackson pared the band down to a trio, keeping brisk, responsive time behind Mr. Goldberg. The eventual drum solo really more of a concerto, à la Max Roach was a deceptively simple thing, a collection of snare-drum rudiments and shrewd silences that ultimately pulled the song forward.

Ali Jackson performs on Aug. 27 in Newburgh, N.Y., (845) 568-0198, newburghjazzseries.com.