Art Blakey’s jazz message

By Doug Klapper

Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers were in full swing last Wednesday with a standing-room-only audience at Jonathan Swift’s. The crowd settled down as the light dimmed and drummer Art Blakey approached the microphone. “We ask you to be as quiet as possible,” he whispered, “...we want you to get every sound that comes off this stage.”

The advice was good. The band delivered some fantastic music that the cultured ear recognizes as a cross between mainstream and modern idiom, but melodically he captured that bitter yet swinging, energetic and off-beat accenting of Dave Brubeck. His concern is not unwarranted, but jazz is still quite prevalent in this area. If you want information on what is happening you can call the Jazz hotline: 262-1500.

Blakley faces this risk. He has always used his band to introduce starting musicians. Usually he acquires winners such as Lee Morgan, Wayne Shorter and Sonny Rollins, but once in a while a Ponomarev must surface.

Music was not the only message Blakey delivered. A serious tone dominated his mood during his closing statements. He spoke of jazz as being a “true American art form” and expressed concern about the weak public support jazz is receiving, and warned that this country is experiencing an exodus of jazz musicians who are finding European audiences more appreciative.

As Miles Davis put it, “If Art Blakey is old-fashioned, then I’m white.”

The modern sound of the horns is experienced more on the incomprehensible they present a welcome display of traditional post-bop improvisation. Perhaps the only disappointment was trumpeter Valery Ponomarev’s style. His melodic control and four-note chromatic patterns were reminiscent of John Coltrane’s style. Alto saxist Bobby Watson was well received by a tolerant audience.

Through his skills Bobby Watson was well received by a tolerant audience. Though he flew through harmonically active passages with a clear and firm tone he was rarely able to stay on top of Blakey’s very fast tempo. The rhythm section, pianist Jimmy Williams and bassist Don Irwin, was the core of Blakey’s success. Not only did they consistently hold the tempo, but where the other players balked on the inexpressible they presented a welcome display of traditional post-bop improvisation.

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