MIT ensemble brings welcome freshness to Jazz Festival

COLLEGIATE JAZZ FESTIVAL
New England Collegiate Jazz Festival Concert Featuring the MIT Jazz Ensemble and Phil Woods Hosted by James O'Dell.

By Craig K. Chang

The concert that ended last Friday's New England Collegiate Jazz Festival almost proved to be too much for participating ensambles, who endured adjudication and master classes all day. The first two ensembles to perform were the University of Rhode Island Jazz Ensemble and the University of Massachusetts Jazz Ensemble, which both seemed a bit groggy. But with great anticipation, Phil Woods and the MIT Jazz Ensemble salvaged the night by injecting some life and thought into the increasingly tired atmosphere.

The MIT Jazz Ensemble too suffered poor taste in music. An apt gesture of surrender to public appeal, the group played an old classic popularized by Shepesh in Seattle, "When I Fall in Love." And with other pieces with such names as "Afterburner," nothing about their playing could be taken seriously.

The URI Jazz Ensemble also got off to a shaky start. But things began to piece together when Phil Woods stepped on stage with the MIT ensemble. He blew his horn with the cool confidence and articulation of a supremely experienced artist. His playing never seemed overdone. He blew his horn with the cool confidence and articulation of a supremely experienced artist.

Phil Woods was, however, by no means a crutch that the MIT Jazz Ensemble leaned on. In Phil Woods' "Quill," Susie Ward and Josh Goldberg gave impassioned saxophone solos that came from their hearts. When the saxophonists passed riffs back and forth in a three-way call and response, the music of the night returned to a form of expression instead of mindless strings of bop cliché.

Even with the spotlight on Phil Woods, the MIT Jazz Ensemble demonstrated what jazz music is all about in its "Variation on a theme by Jimi Hendrix, Mosaic Depression." With this piece, the group managed to capture a whole palette of emotions through its instruments. As the piano played a drunken ostinato, we could picture a figure dancing in circles, in some sort of hallucinatory state. Melancholy rubbed against furor and aural mania. The winds layered a hauntingly serene ambiance over Damon Bramble's violent toots. With these emotional intimations, the performance appeared to have the quality of aural painting that proved the ensemble had the skill and power to project unique abstraction instead of worn-out convention.

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