

Oct 27, 2008 4:04pm PT

The Blues and Jazz: Two American Classics

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By **Richard S. Ginell**



After seeing what a dazzling parade of talent a Los Angeles-based show could attract last October, the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz put on another starry gala concert in the Kodak Theater on Sunday night. This time, the honoree was the unstoppable blues legend B.B. King — and on that theme, the Institute cobbled together a program taking off on the close ties between the blues, jazz — and ultimately, rock and soul.

The show felt a bit stiff in execution, heavily reliant upon a teleprompter for the introductions and even some of the lyrics. Again, though, any knots in the presentation were trumped by the spectacle of many unique, never-to-be-duplicated combinations, a few of which created some amazing music.

There was an “evolution of the blues” sequence that should have led off the concert. Keb’ Mo’ started off down home in the delta, Joe Louis Walker added electricity with a rocking “Sweet Home Chicago,” and Robert Cray took us further into urban territory with “Bright Lights, Big City.” Cassandra Wilson added modern sophistication, accented by Poncho Sanchez’s congas, with a sultry blues that simmered nicely.

The mutations and mergers of the idioms scattered through the evening generated the surprises, with bassist John Patitucci anchoring every stylistic swerve. Kevin Eubanks got to play some whiz-bang, all-stops-pulled-out, Jimi Hendrix-style guitar in “Red House.” Monk was represented by a jazz blues “Straight, No Chaser.” Dee Dee Bridgewater took “Afro-Blue’s” vocal line way off course as Wayne Shorter pierced the ceiling with his high register. Later, Bridgewater covered her shaved head with a hilarious black wig as she go-go-danced through “Sweet Soul Music.”

Things got really complicated and interesting after King was introduced. As U2’s Bono took the lead vocals on “When Love Comes to Town” — with, among others, the Edge on rhythm guitar and Herbie Hancock and music director George Duke on keyboards — King shot off some tasty comments on his guitar and then answered Bono with a jolt of anguished vocal soul (Bono kneeled in worship of the King afterward). Picture a backup horn section with Shorter, Jimmy Heath and Terence Blanchard in the ranks, and you get an idea of the overflow galaxy of talent on that stage.

As before, the concert followed the culmination of the Thelonious Monk Intl. Competition — this time, for saxophonists. The winner, Jon Irabagon — an alto player with an Ornette Coleman-like cry in his tone — got to play in the “Let the Good Times Roll” grand finale and received a contract with Concord Records. All three finalists — the others were altoist Tim Green and tenor man Quamon Fowler — traded licks with Bridgewater, with Irabagon clearly setting off the most combustion on “Just Friends.”