

Boston Sunday Globe

JANUARY 13, 2002

For 10 years, group has made jazz its way

By **Bob Blumenthal**
Globe Correspondent

NEW YORK — For the past decade, some of the best live music in Manhattan has been created on the stage of the New School Jazz Performance Space. This is where the members of the Jazz Composers Collective hold forth a half-dozen times each year, presenting their own bands and those of guests in what has become a reliable forum for new jazz and a rare example of the advantages to be gained from collaboration.

The most recent JCC concert, last month, was unusual in one sense. It featured bands led by two of the five composers-in-residence, as opposed to the more typical pairings of one member and one guest composer. In other respects, it was a model of the variety and continuity that will be demonstrated most clearly when the organization celebrates its 10th anniversary with a week of performances in March.

Pianist Frank Kimbrough, who had hoped to mark the appearance of his new trio CD "Quickening" (OmniTone) before delays pushed the disc's release back several months, opened with the latest version of the unit. Then saxophonist Ted Nash, in a change from the iconoclastic groups heard in his recent JCC efforts (including his Double Quartet, which integrates jazz and classical quartets, and Odeon, a sextet where accordion, violin, and tuba manage to cohabit), returned to the

more conventionally configured quartet music he was playing with Kimbrough and JCC artistic director Ben Allison when the collective was first conceived, augmented in this instance by Nash's associate from the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, trumpeter Marcus Printup. Kimbrough and bassist Allison were common to both bands, yet each set of music displayed the distinct personality of its creator in the 92d installment of an effort Allison described as "a way to present new music on its own terms."

"Guys who couldn't get a gig got together to do something about it," is how Kimbrough summarized the inception of the collective. His own experience in New York to that point had involved a decade of the usual faceless piano-room jobs, with no opportunity to present his own more original concepts. Together with Allison and Nash, he decided to create a vehicle for getting new music heard through a concert series in which each would be featured at least once a season. After a fourth founder ultimately with-

drew, saxophonist Michael Blake and trumpeter Ron Horton soon expanded the original group. With nonprofit status and each member carrying around enough ideas to form multiple ensembles, the JCC was launched in 1992.

Slow gains

Benefits were not immediate.

Record companies were slow to respond to musicians whose previous profiles had been minimal or nonexistent, and the bulk of early attention directed the collective's way focused on the Herbie Nichols Project, a repertory unit led by Allison and Kimbrough. Things changed toward the end of the decade, as European and American jazz labels began providing outlets for the members' original music

and as more famous players and composers - such as Andrew Hill, Lee Konitz, and Wynton Marsalis - became involved in JCC concerts. When albums by Blake, Allison, and Nash subsequently appeared on critics' 10-best lists, a wider audience began to notice the music that JCC members create on

their own.

"Our needs have changed a bit in 10 years," Allison acknowledged, "because we get more opportunities to present our own music in the right way. But the collective is still a force behind much of what we do."

Other jazz musicians have banded together in the past, and some of the resulting organizations have had notable success. (The Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, or AACM, founded in Chicago in 1965, remains active in that city and also presents its members in New York. Boston's own Jazz Composers Alliance has provided an orchestra for its members' large-scale works, and awards annual prizes to new composers.) Where the JCC may be unique is in the way its members reinforce each other, even when they may not participate directly in performances. "Everyone shares information freely," Kimbrough said. "There's always a dialogue, always someone to help with problem solving."

Distinct personalities

"I think there is a certain 'Collective sound' that we can define and redefine every day," Allison added. There may be some truth to this, given the members' shared affection for such iconoclastic compositional legends as Nichols, Hill, and Lennie Tristano, plus a willingness to incorporate the instruments and rhythms of other musical styles. For all these overlapping interests, not to

■
**the Jazz Composers
Collective
has a web site at
www.jazzcollective.com,
and a newsletter
available by request from
43 East 10th Street, Suite
4B, New York, NY 10003.
Its next New School
concert, featuring
Michael Blake's
Elevated Quartet and
guest composer
Peter Apfelbaum's
septet, takes place on
Jan. 24, and the
10th Anniversary
Festival will be held
at New York's Jazz
Standard nightclub
March 19-24**

mention the common personnel found in its various units, each member has preserved a distinct personality. The fluid momentum of Kimbrough's trio would not be confused with the cross-hatchings of Allison's Medicine Wheel, or the grizzled grooves of Blake's Elevated Quartet, just as Blake's Slow Poke and Free Association reveal other sides of his personality.

The collective has also found a way to make "the tradition" part of its new-music mission. The Herbie Nichols Project grew out of a fascination with the works of the pianist composer who died in obscurity in 1963; but where some might have settled for simply resurrecting Nichols as he was heard on his Blue Note trio recordings, or using his tunes as the occasion for a jam session, Kimbrough and Allison searched the Library of Congress for unheard Nichols compositions and arranged his more familiar items for horns. As a result, our knowledge of Nichols has been significantly expanded. Horton undertook a similar effort when he scored Andrew Hill's music for orchestra at one of last season's JCC concerts.

If most jazz musicians continue to pursue business as usual, the Jazz Composers Collective offers an alternative that we may see duplicated with greater frequency as the globalization of the music industry leaves all but the most familiar names behind. "Most of all," Nash noted before the December concert, the collective "has shown me that if you continue to do something you love, there are usually people out there who want to be a part of it." In this instance, those people have lifted Nash and his four partners out of the underground, and given their music a chance to thrive.



photo by Ben Allison

From Left: Michael Blake, Ben Allison, Frank Kimbrough, and Ted Nash of the Jazz Composers Collective

Who's Who in the JCC

Ben Allison: Bassist, founding member, and artistic director responsible for all Jazz Composers Collective concerts and special events. His primary band, Medicine Wheel, is a septet with two saxophones and cello, as well as the kora, a string instrument from Mali, on its upcoming CD. Also leads the quintet Seven Arrows. Recommended disc: "Third Eye" (Palmetto, recorded 1998).

Michael Blake: Saxophonist, member of the Lounge Lizards. His own music has been heard in quartet settings, including the Slow Poke band, featuring slide guitarist Tronzo, and nine-piece Free Association. Most impres-

sive work to date is his debut disc, "Kingdom of Champa" (Intuition, recorded 1996), a suite for nonet written after spending a month with his wife's family in Vietnam – one of the great overlooked jazz recordings of the past decades.

Ron Horton: Trumpeter who has been heard in the bands of Jane Ira Bloom, Allan Chase, Peggy Stern, and others. A critical member of piano great Andrew Hill's sextet, he has scored Hill's compositions for orchestra. Only recording to date as a leader is "Genius Envy" (Omnitone, recorded 1999), which provides an excellent account of his playing and writing.

Frank Kimbrough: Pianist and founding member. Heard regularly with the Maria Schneider Orchestra and vocalist Kendra Shank. Tends to feature his own music in duo (with vibist Joe Locke), trio, or unusual quartet completed by sax, guitar, and drums. New duo and trio discs on Omnitone have been

delayed until late spring; until then, recommended disc is the trio album "Chant" (Igmod, recorded 1992 and 1997).

Ted Nash: Reeds and founding member. Most widely heard and traveled member of the JCC, thanks to his chair in the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. His Jazz Composers Collective projects have included his Double Quartet, in which a standard jazz foursome is joined by a string quartet, and Odeon, a sextet that includes accordion, violin, and tuba and can be heard on "Sidewalk Meeting" (Arabesque, recorded 2000).

Herbie Nichols Project: A septet led by Allison and Kimbrough – and including all five Jazz Composers Collective members – that has recorded three CDs featuring arrangements of compositions (many newly discovered) by legendary composer and pianist Nichols (1919-1963). Recommended disc: "Strange City" (Palmetto, recorded 2001).