

The New York Times

By Ben Ratliff

Sunday, March 17, 2002

YOU can see jazz performers as trailblazing loners — and many of the best of them are — but at certain points they need to become joiners. One of the secret histories of jazz is that of its collective organizations, which have helped musicians control their own concert booking, composing and recording.

In New York City just before World War I, the Clef Club was a musician-operated booking agency that sent bands out to play all kinds of gigs. Among its members were James P. Johnson, Kid Sneeze, Abba Labba and Dude Finley. If you haven't heard of the last three, don't worry. The point is not that they left a legacy, but that they made a living.

In the 1960's and 70's, however, there were many more musicians' collectives. They were formed to create not only gigs, but also new compositions. Jazz was becoming acknowledged as a serious art form, and serious art forms deserve serious works. But such works need time, money and encouragement, none of which are plentiful in nightclubs.

The most significant collective today is the Jazz Composers Collective, founded in 1992. A decade is a long time for a nonprofit operation run by jazz musicians. (They are known to have egos.) And during that time the Jazz Composers Collective has grown from bright idea to a mark of quality. It has found grant money for commissioning composition and recording, and it has put on 90 concerts, featuring the works of 45 composers. Its work has resulted in 14 records, and it has even gotten involved with a little repertory, performing the works of Herbie Nichols and Andrew Hill. But its central aim remains what it was at the beginning: to present new music.

Improbably, its members are still talking to one another — and playing together, too. The collective will celebrate its 10th birthday with a weeklong residence this week at the reopened Jazz Standard, at 116 West 27th Street in Manhattan. Each night will feature different bands that have sprouted from the collective's core membership, including Ben



Members of the Jazz Composers Collective, from left, Ben Allison, Ted Nash, Ron Horton, Frank Kimbrough and Michael Blake

The Jazz Composers Collective, to be honored this week, has long been a pillar of support.

Allison and Seven Arrows (Tuesday); the Herbie Nichols Project (Tuesday and next Sunday); Michael Blake's new Quartet and Tentet (Wednesday); Frank Kimbrough's piano trio (Thursday); and bands later in the week led by Ted Nash and Ron Horton.

Back in 1992, Mr. Allison, the bassist and the collective's artistic director, was reading a biography of Alban Berg, in which he noted that Berg had joined a composers' collective in Vienna. "At that time, there might be a concert in which there'd be music by Bach, Brahms and Webern," Mr. Allison said. "The Webern didn't fit with the program, so it wasn't received well. But if Berg and his friends could create a scene around that music, and it could be inviting rather than off-putting, then they would be more successful."

So Mr. Allison and his friends began by putting on annual concerts at Greenwich House Music School in the West Village. The concerts featured music by one of the collective's core composers and one invited guest. The group compiled a mailing list, looking to expand their audience. And because Berg had edited a newsletter for his collective, Mr. Allison made sure a newsletter was issued by the Jazz Composers Collective. It still arrives

four times a year, looking very professional for a product of a shoestring operation. It now announces quarterly concerts at the New School's auditorium and lists an impressive advisory board, including Mr. Hill and Joe Lovano. By 1996, people started to show up, including critics. Suddenly something was at stake.

There is no musical credo in the collective; there is no way to explain what these groups sound like in the aggregate. Mr. Kimbrough's piano trio has an open, drifting Paul Bley influence. Mr. Allison's music is percussive, highly arranged and eclectic. (A

Malian kora player, Mamadou Diabate, will join his octet on Friday.) The music of the saxophonist Mr. Nash, at the moment, is going in a linear, melodic, Warne Marsh-like direction.

But the composers do share one tendency: they feel free to combine elements that 10 years ago were associated with opposing, nearly adversarial wings of jazz. These musicians might play music rooted in New Orleans or bebop, and play it well, then play a free piece outside of meter. That has been part of the growing eclecticism in jazz over the last decade. But the collective contains that tendency in one organized body, and it has been influential. "What I've discovered is that the lines between all this music are very fine," Mr. Nash said. "Those lines don't really exist. I'd like to see people forget about that and just play what they hear."

What the members of the collective are hearing at this point is a more coherent aesthetic. All this has been accomplished without a major record label, gigs at major clubs or a publicist trying to define them with a buzzword. And as the corporate structures of jazz are falling away — principally the record companies, who have narrowed their focus or cut their losses entirely — the independent jazz musician (is there any other kind?) may look to the Jazz Composers Collective as a model. Jazz history is being made, but it's a positive, organized kind — not the kind that will be memorialized in black-and-white films with a lot of smoke and rain. ■