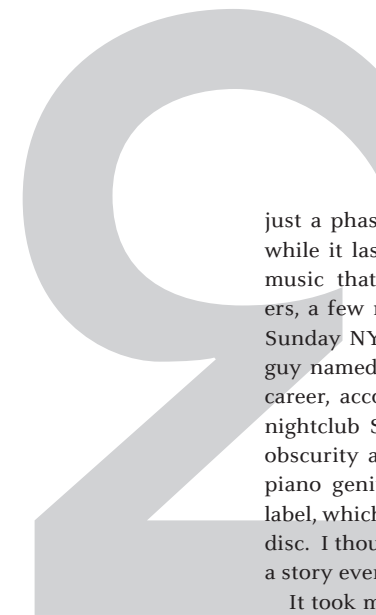
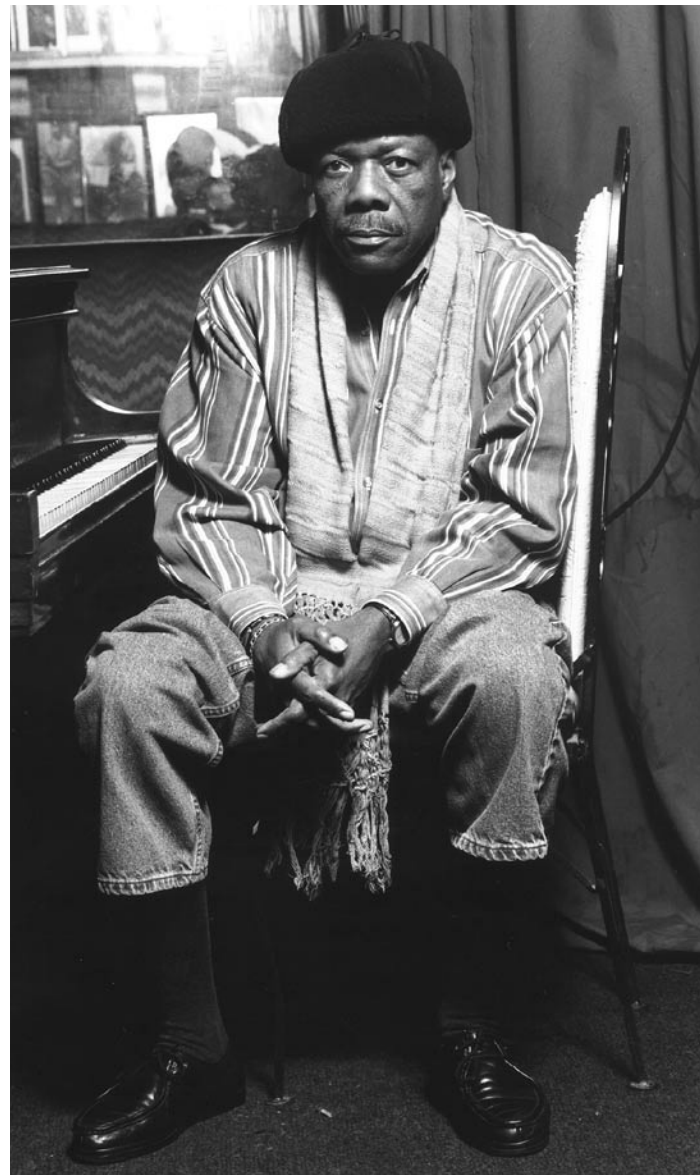


THREE IS THE MAGIC NUMBER

THE PIANO TRIO IS REBORN

Although I don't know why, I'm frequently drawn to the piano trio as the quintessential jazz form. Obviously it has a huge place in jazz history, but no more so than horns or other leading instruments and their ensembles. There's a simplicity in the piano trio format that allows me to focus, possibly, or it could be that it's hard for me to listen to horns without feeling the big shadows of Miles and Coltrane. Or whatever. Probably



just a phase. But let's take advantage of that phase while it lasts, because there's actually good current music that's happening in this format. For starters, a few months ago I was thumbing through the Sunday NY Times, and I came across a review of a guy named Frank Hewitt. Hewitt spent most of his career, according to the interviewer, playing at the nightclub Smalls, never released an album, died in obscurity and now the very first recordings of this piano genius are emerging on Smalls' own record label, which was established expressly to put out this disc. I thought "I gotta hear this." It's just too good of a story even if the music turns out to be crap.

It took me at least three months to turn up a copy of the disc, and it is indeed a gem. Entitled "We Loved You", the music was recorded at two sessions in the spring of 2001, both with bassist Ari Roland and with two different drummers, Jimmy Lovelace and Danny Rosenfeld. The sound isn't pristine, at times even sounding like a vintage Prestige session in the quality of the piano tone (which is a compliment in my opinion!). Hewitt was 66 years old, and these recordings cap a long career of appearing with Billie Holiday, John Coltrane, Dinah Washington, Cecil Payne and Clarence Sharpe, among others. Over the course of the nine previous years he appeared two or three times a week at Smalls, which itself had developed into a hub of superior jazz music in NYC.

The overall mood is one of an afterhours, late night on the bandstand. There is only one original, "Frank's Blues", the set being dominated by standards: "Ghost of a Chance", "That Ole Devil Called Love", "Cherokee". While obviously steeped in the blues and in the church music of his Harlem youth, Hewitt spins lush romantic lines that rarely develop into shouting, preferring mild coaxing and the occasional Tatum arabesque. The drums play only a secondary role, as each tune is led off by an impressionistic introduction by the leader and sometimes only the bass adds counterpoint. Most songs are taken at an easy to slow tempo, so relaxed you imagine the players grinning slightly as they toss ideas back and forth.

The pace picks up a bit when Rosenfeld gets to the drummer's chair in the second recording session (the last three cuts on the disc). A much younger player than either Hewitt or Roland, Rosenfeld maybe adds the energy that the others pick up on, or maybe it was a sunnier day that day. They dig deeper into a bluesy bag, with the rhythm section laying down a solid swing. Hewitt's original "Frank's Blues" ups the notch even more, although we're certainly not in Bud Powell territory by any means. And the closing rendition of "Cherokee" misleads with its moody solo piano introduction before the fast swing commences.

Hewitt's music is subtle, and it may not be apparent at first listen (at least to the casual listener) what makes this special. But there is truly magic in his

touch. It isn't every day you come across someone you've never heard of who is this powerful. The flavor is in the nuances and I would encourage repeated listenings, to escape that first time romantic reverie you may find yourself in. I'm at a loss to understand why Hewitt didn't have a more recognized career. At any rate, Luke Kaven, the producer, has done us an enormous service by getting this out there. I would take the time to find this one, folks. Don't delay.

The flip side of the record business is Bill Charlap. Charlap is clearly an original stylist who has been working on his trio performances for years, and most recently has coalesced his working band featuring Peter and Kenny Washington (unrelated) into a front line major label act for Blue Note. And somehow Charlap manages to rise above the marketing strategies that seem imposed on him. Last time out it was an all Hoagy Carmichael record, this time it's all songs by Leonard Bernstein (thankfully not all West Side Story, at least). The modern jazz industry seems to believe that songbook discs (or in the pop world "tribute" discs) are the key to success. It must have worked once or twice. And it's remotely possible that Charlap himself is behind it, we can't rule that out, but certainly it's not a phenomenon limited to Charlap.

But, as I said, he and his mates rise above it. This is a much more playful, bright record than Frank Hewitt's disc, and you don't need to know the Bernstein Broadway catalog to enjoy the songs. There's some tight arrangements, and the rhythm section gets featured much more. This is a focused, modern jazz trio, adjusting to the bright lights, where Hewitt seems to play for himself and let the arrangements invent themselves in the moment. Also, the recording quality is predictably cleaner.

Here's the real deal though: I went into this disc figuring I wouldn't like it, but I do. I guess I was turned off by seeing that Charlap had done another songbook, but this is a really enjoyable disc. Rhythmically speaking, all three players hew close to inside rhythm and relatively established roles (Kenny Washington's drumming swings very eloquently, but his tastefulness doesn't take him outside playing the time very often). So once you put the innovation thing aside, and what use is innovation anyway if it isn't musical, you can just groove with the music. And it swings in a big way. Bernstein's songs have probably never enjoyed such a classy recommendation, prompting the guy in the liner notes to imagine Bernstein being remembered more for his Broadway musicals than for his classical music career.

So there you have it, the subtle, nuanced majesty of Frank Hewitt and the jaunty tasteful playing of the Bill Charlap trio, two sides of the continuing story of the jazz piano. And the year's only halfway over.