

Maynard blows hot winds to lift start of jazz festival

Maynard Ferguson



When: Thursday night.

Where: Indiana Roof

Ballroom.

Star ratings: 4 excellent, 3 good, 2 fair, 1 poor

By Jay Harvey

STAFF WRITER

Blowing back the inevitable approach of Father Time, 71-year-old trumpeter Maynard Ferguson led his Big Bop Nouveau band through a hard-charging program at the Indiana Roof Ballroom, helping to open the inaugural Indy Jazz Fest.

A sold-out Indiana Roof audience of 1,140 repeatedly roared its approval. An early deadline prevented me from hearing singer Diane Schuur in the second set. Given the way Ferguson's 10-piece ensemble seems to fill all available acoustic space, it would have been interesting to learn how it accommodates a vocalist.

At any rate, Ferguson, whose labored breathing during his remarks to the audience would not immediately bring to mind a leather-lunged brass titan, held the stage for an hour partly through a cagey display of his much younger sidemen.

His high-note specialty survives mainly in brief but spectacular wails that bring to mind musical "action painting." Ferguson has a poetic, low-key side, but its appearance seemed even more fleeting Thursday night. Some of his most interesting playing came in a quarter-hour excursion to India, where Ferguson sometimes teaches.

Titled *Misra-Dhenuka*, the piece opened and closed with the leader sounding a bell and intoning a chant close to the microphone. A wash of synthesizer created a timeless perspective against which the full band played a modal theme. Ferguson was eloquent playing the firebird (a valve and slide trumpet) in dialogue with his trombonist, Reggie Watkins.

Out of that came a swinging but

still solemn main section, featuring an exchange of solos by two of the band's other trumpeters.

Some listeners may have recalled the sometimes pretentious tone poems of Ferguson's long-ago employer, Stan Kenton. But the novel *Misra-Dhenuka* was helped in context by a greater coherence than could be found in the familiar piece that preceded it, Duke Ellington's *Caravan*.

This arrangement didn't touch the exotic mystery at the heart of the tune. It featured some good solos, including an overmiked but articulate episode from drummer Dave Throckmorton, but the arrangement ended as if depleted of energy and ideas.

More to the point was a romp through Joe Zawinul's *Birdland*, which showcased the lockstep precision of the band in a way reminiscent of the set-opener, Tom Garling's *You Got It*.

The evening's entertainment opened with a compact, exciting set by Steve Allee's New York in the Fifties band. The longtime Indianapolis pianist-composer headed the group heard on his recent disc of the same name, which consists of music he wrote for a film documentary based on Dan Wakefield's memoir of life among artists and journalists in Manhattan four decades ago.

Allee has come up with some great tunes, suggestive of the hard-bop style that emerged in that decade and opening up many opportunities for bluesy improvisation. Trumpeter Derrick Gardner, trombonist Vincent Gardner, tenor saxophonist Rob Dixon, bassist Jim Anderson and drummer Jakubu Griffin took full advantage of them, as did the bandleader.

The Big Beat, by Derrick Gardner, fitted the rest of the repertoire smartly, and Allee's solo of Ellington's *In a Sentimental Mood* was a peerless tribute to a musician without whom jazz festivals such as Indianapolis' new one would be unlikely anywhere.