Our Twenty-fifth Season

Our One Hundred Fifty-ninth Program
2003-2004

Continuing to Soar:
The New Black Eagle Jazz Band

Sponsored by the Department of Music and the
New Hampshire Library of Traditional Jazz

8 p.m. Monday, September 22, 2003
Johnson Theatre, Paul Creative Arts Center, Durham, NH
The New Black Eagle Jazz Band

"Often, in minor rhetorical flights of fancy, we describe jazz as being celebratory in and of itself, and the ontological validity of that claim takes on an additional dimension when there is in fact something specific to celebrate. When most mortals find the Warholian fifteen minutes of fame to be elusive, and corporate bodies recombine and redefine themselves with each fluctuation of the bottom line, any human endeavor which maintains a continuous public existence for a quarter of a century deserves acknowledgement, and the quality of the commitment, vitality, and aesthetic results in the case at hand mandates recognition, both appreciative and joyous, of the highest order."

No, this is not a paean of self-congratulation, though a temporary suspension of humility might suggest that it could be! It is instead the opening paragraph of what appeared on this page in January of 1996 when the Black Eagles were celebrating their own 25th season, but the parallel is all too tempting.

Now well into their fourth decade, the Eagles have had that rare musical luxury of exploring to the ultimate the potential of a given idiom, and demonstrating in a manner impossible for more short-lived and minimally-recorded aggregations the dialectic through which the traditional format of collective improvisation interspersed with solos can be extended to constantly fresh levels of cumulative musical interest and excitement. The world is in their debt for transforming something seemingly archaic into a vehicle for boundless imagination.

This accomplishment has prompted perspicacious performer and critic Tex Wyndham to observe:

"The NBEJB has demonstrated that the best jazz is receptive to a broad range of musical ideas and blends them into something truly new. There are lots of combos out there, good ones too, that basically try to recreate the sound of their particular idols. This is a useful and valid way to play from the point of view of preserving the full jazz spectrum. However, it hardly needs to be said that when jazz history is written, it is the name of the innovators who are set forth therein. The New Black Eagles have gone beyond being a great uptown New Orleans band (no small achievement in itself) to become a great jazz band by any measure, one that does not as readily fit into a specific category."

The Eagles have spiced our diets numerous times over our quarter century, including the close of our first season and the start of our 20th, and it has been satisfying to sample first-hand the richness of their ever more flavorful menus. Of course our appetites can be further satiated by the more than four-score (!) recordings on which they appear. And travelers might encounter the group in London, Belfast, Vancouver, Stuttgart, Oslo, the Netherlands, or even Singapore, not to mention Tanglewood, Harvard, Princeton, the Smithsonian, and Lake Wobegon, etc., etc.

Our series utilizes an inclusive interpretation of the term "traditional" which embraces a variety of approaches to the continuity of the central jazz language, but always emphasizing creativity based on respect rather than rejection. As the Eagles continue to soar they remind us of both jazz's first great point of departure and their own virtual rediscovery of its viability and contemporaneity.
So we can reiterate that the music is celebratory indeed, expressing so much that is positive in our troubled humanity. And this occasion for the contemplation of the passage of time makes us particularly conscious of the need to celebrate the contributions of so many who have graced our stage over these years and subsequently passed on, along with those others who worked almost invisibly “behind the scenes” in making the New Hampshire Library of Traditional Jazz a reality, leaving us the blessings of their vision, generosity, counsel, and faith, and a mandate to fulfill. We thank them all, and all of you.
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