

3-27-2009

Concert: The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra

John Mosca

The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra

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Recommended Citation

Mosca, John and The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, "Concert: The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra" (2009). *All Concert & Recital Programs*. 4609.
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ITHACA COLLEGE
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ITHACA COLLEGE CONCERTS 2008-9

THE VANGUARD JAZZ ORCHESTRA
Established by Thad Jones and Mel Lewis

John Mosca, director
Dick Oatts, artistic director
Douglas Purviance, orchestra manager
Jim McNeely, composer-in-residence
Thomas Bellino, project director
Jerry Van Campen, technical director

Nick Marchione, trumpet
Frank Greene, trumpet
Terell Stafford, trumpet
Scott Wendholt, trumpet
John Mosca, trombone
Luis Bonilla, trombone
Jason Jackson, trombone
Douglas Purviance, bass trombone
Dick Oatts, alto and soprano saxophones, flute
Billy Drewes, alto and soprano saxophones, flute, clarinet
Rich Perry, tenor saxophone, flute
Ralph LaLama, tenor saxophone, flute, clarinet
Gary Smulyan, baritone saxophone
Jim McNeely, piano
Dennis Mackrel, drums
Doug Weiss, bass

Ford Hall
Friday, March 27, 2009
8:15 p.m.

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History of the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra

The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra is the current title for a band that began life as the Thad Jones-Mel Lewis Orchestra in 1966 and has performed continuously ever since.

The story is familiar but bears repeating that in 1966 cornetist, composer, arranger, Thad Jones and drummer Mel Lewis founded a band in New York. Having settled in New York after leaving their respective touring jobs with Basie and Kenton, Thad and Mel along with many of their colleagues needed an outlet for their creative energies and relief from the tedium of the studio work. With a handful of arrangements they approached legendary club owner Max Gordon and were booked at the Village Vanguard for 3 Mondays in February. Critical acclaim, awards and international success followed but in 1979, tired of frequent traveling and the economic uncertainty that even great jazz musicians endure in America, Thad left the band to accept leadership of the Danish Radio Orchestra in Copenhagen.

Mel decided to continue the band now billed as Mel Lewis and the Jazz Orchestra and enlisted the talents of his old friend and former band member Bob Brookmeyer who, miraculously was just returning to active playing and composing in New York. The band not only survived but, with Brookmeyer's writing, continued the innovation and influence that Thad and Mel had begun. Bob moved on to other projects and ultimately also settled in Europe, the new material coming from within the band now. In 1990 the band would endure a terrible blow when Mel Lewis died after a 5-year battle with cancer. For the members, all of whom had been there 5 years and several over 10, losing Mel was a deep family tragedy, for great bands invariably become families. They are also teams; and in this spirit decided to continue the band as a cooperative effort. (When asked who was "fronting" the band one of the veterans was heard snapping "...the music".) So three weeks have become a permanent gig spanning over four decades and another name change; to the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra. Several of the current key members played for Thad, so the original precepts of sound and swinging are proudly held and displayed while the other original precepts of creativity and experimentation are nurtured and encouraged.

The Village Vanguard is still a great place to be on a Monday night no matter which side of the bandstand you're on. The orchestra's *The Way - Music of Slide Hampton* recording won a Grammy in 2004 for "best arrangements for jazz orchestra." In 2006-2007, the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra's performances in the United States included the University of Arizona, Michigan State University, Kansas State University, Detroit's Symphony Hall, Orange County Performing Arts Center, University of Massachusetts and the Philadelphia Museum of

Art. In the summer of 2007 the Vanguard returned to Europe, performing at the North Sea Jazz Festival in Holland, the Imatra Big Band Festival in Finland, the Blue Note Records Festival in Belgium, and also gave performances in Italy and Germany. The orchestra began a yearly commitment to Jazz Assisi, a concert series in Assisi, Italy that incorporates the orchestra's education program "Precepts of Swing". Appearances in the 2007-08 season included Clemson University, University of Florida Gainesville, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Shippensburg University, and Princeton University. Their 2005 recording, *Up from the Skies*, the music of the ensemble's pianist, composer, and arranger, Jim McNeely, was nominated for two Grammys including "best jazz ensemble." Last month, the orchestra garnered the 2009 Grammy award for "best large jazz ensemble album" for its *Monday Night Live at the Village Vanguard*.

WWW.VANGUARDJAZZORCHESTRA.COM

For over four decades the **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** has been committed to engaging audiences in jazz and related American music experiences. The orchestra serves as a creative outlet for some of the nation's foremost performers, composers, and arrangers. One of the driving forces behind the longevity and artistic excellence of this ensemble is a commitment to the original Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra precepts of sound and the nurturing and encouragement of creativity and experimentation in the creators, performers and listeners of jazz.

Sixteen as One Music Inc., a not-for-profit 501(c)(3), was created by the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra to promote the development and growth of jazz music through education and community outreach programs. The goals of this endeavor are: To provide world-wide performances, workshops, lectures and symposia about jazz and related musical genres; To commission new arrangements and original compositions for jazz orchestra; To document historical and innovative projects through audio and video recordings; To initiate partnerships and collaborations with cultural, education and corporate institutions; To help build and sustain an international jazz audience; To foster and promote jazz education in schools and under-served communities.

The Vanguard Jazz Orchestra's *Up From The Skies- Music of Jim McNeely*, Planet Arts Recordings is available online at: www.PlanetArts.org

VJO National and International Bookings contact:

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