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Refining Classic Sounds

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The Music of Count Basie: Juilliard Jazz Orchestra with guest Frank Wess

Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola Broadway at 60th Street, (212) 258-9595 Through Sunday

Essentially Ellington Concert

Avery Fisher Hall 10 Lincoln Center Pl., (212) 721-6500 Saturday

Essentially Ellington All-Stars

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There's no better illustration of the past, present and future of essential American music than the sight of legendary saxophonist Frank Wess fronting the Juilliard Jazz Orchestra: It's one of the most senior players in jazz (pushing 90) collaborating with some of the youngest (two of whom, drummer James Mcbride and trumpeter Gabriel Medd, have just turned 20) to make a sound that's ageless.

Although advertised as a Count Basie celebration, both sets on opening night featured a lot of Duke Ellington, thus providing a perfect lead-in to Jazz at Lincoln Center's climactic Essentially Ellington concert this Saturday (which will be webcast live), at which three prize-winning high school big bands will put up their Dukes alongside JaLC majordomo Wynton Marsalis. For even more Ellington, a small group of still-youngish competition veterans led by trumpeter Tatum Greenblatt will offer an excellent late-night set of Ellingtonia and Strayhorniana in a modern manner in the Ellington All-Stars concert.

Four events presented by Jazz at Lincoln Center over a 10-day span illustrate the Ellington-structured hierarchy of education and achievement at JaLC: High-school groups vie for supremacy in the Essentially Ellington competition, and the best make it to the annual big show at Avery Fisher on Saturday. The most outstanding players, hopefully, will get into Juilliard. The after-hours set at Dizzy's (the All-Stars) spotlights different interpretations of Ellington by five players who made it

through the high-school and college levels and are working now professionally. ("We're here to serve as example of the fact that people do play music after high school," Mr. Greenblatt said.)

Then, the very cream of the crop can aspire to play with Mr. Marsalis in the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, which, coincidentally, played several slices of early Ellington (including "The Mooche" and "Black and Tan Fantasy") in the Allen Room last week as part of their concert "Prohibition and the Jazz Age." The message is clear: The music of Duke Ellington is an essential part of every jazz musician's development.

On Tuesday, both the full orchestra and the quintet sets contrasted Ellington repertory warhorses ("Cottontail" and their own reading of "The Mooche") with some more obscure items, and both bands earned extra credit for focusing on Ellington blues and exotica. The Juilliarders came forth with the 1956 "Feet Bone" and "Oclupaca" (which opens the 1970 Latin American Suite) in those categories, and, an hour later, the All-Stars matched them with the 1958 "A-Flat Minor" (which is actually in F major, go figure) and "Ad Lib on Nippon" (best known in the 1966 Far East Suite). The quintet, with its trumpet (Mr. Greenblatt) and trombone (Willie Applewhite) frontline, also offered thoughtful readings of Strayhorn's "Smada" and "Johnny Come Lately."

But it wasn't only Essentially Ellington; it was also Basically Basie. Juilliard conductor Bob Stewart began with Eddie Durham's "Every Tub," with Pete Anderson taking Lester Young's classic opening tenor solo. Guest Frank Wess supplied two Countish originals reflecting his many years of royal service—"Dejection Blues," and "Segway in C"—before closing the set with his own chart on "Battle Royal," thus bringing everything back home to Ellington. To say that Mr. Wess sounds amazing at 89, on both tenor sax and flute, is not enough of a compliment: He plays with an astonishingly full tone, a limitless flow of improvisational ideas, and no end of things to say about the blues.

The orchestra finished with the oft-played Ellington band theme "Take the A Train," reanimated considerably by an extended solo by Mr. Wess. Enjoyable as it was, there was a bittersweet quality in that everyone knew it would be the final tune of the set. Fortunately, there's plenty of Ellington to be heard this week; Lord knows, everything the man wrote was essential.

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