

Basie Blues Singer Jamie Davis Debuts in Hollywood

By Skoot Larson

What a shame it is that the only jazz station in town won't support musicians when they come around. Such was the case for the August 29th performance by jazz and blues stylist Jamie Davis as he fronted a splendid array of talent on the stage of Catalina's Bar & Grill in Hollywood. Davis, the headlining vocalist with the Count Basie Orchestra from 2000 to 2003, made his Los Angeles debut accompanied by Basie band mates Scotty Barnhardt on trumpet and bassist James Leary, along with Bay area jazz and blues reed man Charles McNeil, Gregg Field on drums and local pianist Shelly Berg.

The audience at Catalina's was rewarded with an exceptional performance by both singer and back-up musicians. Saxophonist McNeil is an amazing technician in the bebop tradition and he has quite a soulful blues voice as well. Trumpeter Barnhardt, employing an assortment of mutes and plungers, brought to mind all the brass men who made the Count's band a memorable aggregation over some six decades. Pianist Shelly Berg added his own special magic to the mix, at times seeming to be so captured by the music that he was off in some other jazz universe where Monk is the heavenly ruler and harmonically advanced chord changes are the common spoken tongue.

Jamie Davis, the picture of polished cool, strolled about the stage applying his resonant pipes to a diverse collection of tunes from *My Funny Valentine* to Monk's *Straight No Chaser*. Every selection was touched with a unique styling that claimed the song as his very own and made the hearts of the women in the audience flutter. Davis' bountiful baritone covers an amazing range which the singer puts to its full use from his excellent bop scatting to effects like the final note on *My Funny Valentine*, where Davis hits the note we expect, then raises that tone in a glissando of two full octaves.

Davis keeps his repertoire interesting, serving up the Count Basie's signature blues tunes along side the traditional American Songbook numbers and more modern pop standard by composers like Stevie Wonder and George Harrison. Whomever the music's writer or arranger, Davis makes each melody his own, expressing that intimacy with notes and lyric that separates true jazz and blues voices from mere "singers." When

Jamie Davis shouts out Every Day I Have the Blues, you believe it in spite of the impish smile on his face, again, something that the ladies found rather charming.

Pianist Shelly Berg contributed a perfectly balance backing on piano for the entire aggregation. Berg can sound like the Count at times, while playing his own unique style of piano and, in some spaces, using only pianissimo background chord or single note to emphasize Jamie's vocal improvisations. Launching into solos, Berg is a joyful contortionist, almost as much fun to watch as he is to hear. Berg bounces on the bench like a happy child, a look of spiritual rapture lighting up his visage.

Jamie Davis is definitely one the most exciting singers in the jazz world today. If you missed his Southern California appearance, Jamie's new compact disc, It's A Good Thing, is available on Unity Music, (www.unity-music.net) and has Jamie fronting a 21-piece Basie style orchestra with arrangements by folks like Shelly Berg, Allyn Ferguson and Tom Hart.

The audience was a bit scant, which was good for us, but discouraging for this fine talent. It was unfortunate that Jamie couldn't get better cooperation from the radio voice so many rely upon to hear jazz news. No doubt KKJZ was too wrapped up in the self-promotion of their annual rock and roll extravaganza that they've dubiously dubbed the Blues Festival, rather than to direct their listeners to a true interpreter of jazz and blues in the finest American big band tradition.