

# ERIC REED & WYCLIFFE GORDON, AN ORCHESTRA OF TWO

by Skoot Larson

The duo of pianist **Eric Reed** and trombone master **Wycliffe Gordon** performed their annual benefit concert in support of the **American Lung Association** Sunday afternoon (June 24, 2007) before a packed auditorium at The Colony in Murrieta. The Colony, a senior community in California's Riverside County where Eric's mother Jacqueline resides, has hosted Eric's yearly charity recital for six summers with the number of jazz fans in attendance increasing at each annual event.



After a warm introduction by Jacqueline, making everyone in the assembly feel like a part of the Reed family, the performers took their places. Seated at the piano, Eric is a ball-of-energy with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Gordon, introduced by Reed as his adopted musical brother, is a big man, built like a refrigerator with shoulders a city-block wide. Both jazzmen exhibited a broad and fun sense of humor, in their bearing and in their music.

After a serious and stirring rendition of The Lord's Prayer, the two men launched into Duke Ellington's "C-Jam Blues," Eric mixing his Duke with a hint of other old masters like James P. Johnson and Fats Waller. Gordon combined his natural ability to mimic human voices through his slide trombone with a combination of straight mute and plunger.

Some trombonists are said to be able to make their instrument talk. Gordon's axe was holding several different conversations at one time! His playing growled, barked, soft-talked, and even employed a sort of "Bronx Cheer" effect I've only heard in old Spike Jones recordings, what Spike used to call "the Bird-o-phone!" Each distinct trombone voice from Gordon displayed rich creative jazz ideas, perfect tonality and swinging rhythm. Especially exciting to this audience was Gordon's amazing three-octave glissandos, using lip control rather than the instrument's slide. In example, on

Ellington's "Caravan," Gordon broke with a scream above the trombone's normal register and rode his embouchure's elevator right down to the sub-basement!

Program highlights included Eric's piano fireworks on Benny Golson's "Five Spot After Dark," his left hand making heavy straight-ahead statements while his right took the low notes for a walk as efficiently as any sting bass man.

A number of sensitive ballades balanced the two-hour show, the most memorable being "Embraceable You." While Reed had some lush and radiant keyboard ideas, Gordon stole the show using plunger and straight mute once again, but here in a more *sotto-voce* manner.

For the concert's unbeatable finale, our duo called on the Duke one more time, performing "It Don't Mean A Thing If it Ain't Got That Swing." Eric Reed and Wycliffe Gordon demonstrated the meaning of swing as well as the spirit of jazz, adding vocal choruses to their instrumental expertise. Gordon sang the tune's lyrics, scatted a few choruses, then engaged in a "call-and-response" with the assembled guests. After winding the crowd into to a frenzy with his audience participation episode, Gordon taunted Reed to sing as well. Eric told Wycliffe he couldn't sing a play at the same time, so Gordon edge Reed over on the bench and assumed piano duties, nudging the primary pianist to grab the microphone and show his own scat-singing prowess. Of course both men proved excellent and accomplished vocalist, Reed himself having grown up in the church choir.

Eric Reed promised the wildly applauding crowd, which had come to their feet in appreciation, that next year, Wycliffe Gordon would once again join him for this annual event. The final note of joy for the afternoon came when Jacqueline Reed announced the Eric and Wycliffe had raised some \$1,500 for the American Lung Association.