

Fuelling the jazz with an injec



The best performers at the Guinness Jazz Festival in Cork are those who bring a creative touch to the material of the past, writes Ray Comiskey

The 29th Guinness Jazz Festival opened last Friday with a hint of global warming in the air; beat-the-smoking-ban tables outside the bars, cafes and coffee-houses into the balmy late October night. And if the weather was better than expected, so was the jazz.

Or at least some of it. A lacklustre programme promised some goodies, but much of the headline material had the whiff of – if not gerontocracy, not itself any bar to creativity – at least the comfort of the familiar and the potentially deadly embrace of heritage music.

As Sunday night's concert at the Opera House showed, the jazz heritage doesn't have to be a poisoned chalice. When Joe Lovano's Nonet ventured back almost 60 years to the music of Miles Davis's *Birth of the Cool* band and the equally distinctive work of his great contemporary, Tadd Dameron, what emerged was a performance that came very close to equalling the memorable one by Charlie Haden's Liberation Orchestra at the same venue last year.

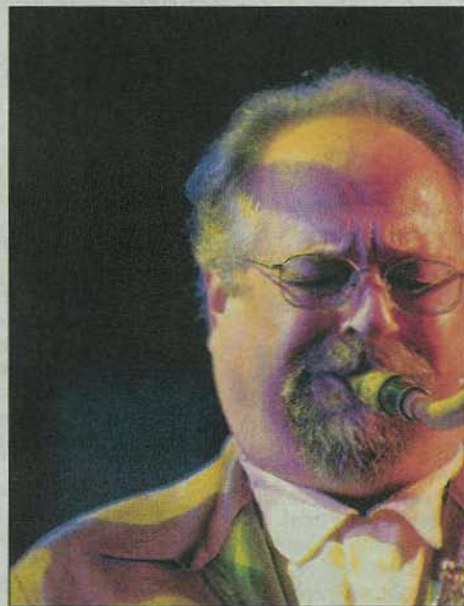
A bare 24 hours earlier, however, Benny Golson had led a tribute band of excellent musicians playing the music of Clifford Brown, the great trumpeter killed at 25 in a car crash half a century ago this year. Played to a packed house at the Everyman, the for-

mat was unvarying: perfunctorily scored ensemble themes followed by a funereal succession of overlong solos. It was heritage as a marketing brand, suicidal to listen to.

Age has nothing to do with how you treat the jazz heritage; the difference is imagination. Using an instrumentation which differed only slightly from the original Davis band and rather more from the Tadd Dameron line-ups, Lovano approached the music of the past not only with respect for its integrity, but also with an inquiring, creative spirit.

What we got was bliss: over an hour of a marvellous band in prime form, performing music as fresh and rewarding as the day it was newly minted. Opening with two movements of his own *Streams of Expression* suite, Lovano moved on to a succession of gems: Dameron's gorgeous *On a Misty Night*, followed by the old Cool band's *Moon Dreams*, *Move* and *Boplicity*, with a prologue and epilogue sensitively scored by Gunther Schuller.

With the original orchestrations substantially intact, the band memorably brought out their beauty and, as soloists, responded superbly to the stimulus. And they brought the concert to a fitting climax with a long, minor blues, *Deal*, from Lovano's *52nd Street Themes* album. A great ensemble piece, it al-



so gave lengthy solo space to all the front line, with Lovano helping to concoct riffs to spur them on.

The concert was opened by the Moutin Reunion Quartet, a stunningly accomplished group who raced through an extremely challenging repertoire of originals with breathtaking ease. It lacked light and shade, and some arresting bass solos from François Moutin, replete with virtuoso harmonics, were too much of a good thing. But the band had a notable pianist in Pierre de Bethmann.

The previous day at the Triskel produced something else to keep out the cold – another superbly creative response to a great artist in

ection of imagination



Play it again, Joe: from Joe Lovano we got a marvellous band in prime form, performing music as fresh and rewarding as the day it was minted.

Photograph: Bernie Keating/
Provision

a crucial visceral quality that always seems present in the work, even when its characters are mired in irresolution and inaction.

Doran, a gifted, strikingly original guitarist, is like a painter in sound, able to enter Beckett's universe from a perspective different, yet complementary, to Guilfoyle's; two sides of the same coin. In a tightly knit unit driven brilliantly by drummer Sean Carpio (deservedly given the festival's Best Young Irish Artist award this year), they had the services of an astonishing young Swiss vocalist, Isa Wiss. Pitch-perfect, with a lovely, warm tonal quality and range of perhaps three octaves, full bottom notes, with no shrillness at the top, and no break in registers, she handled this challenging music with expressive aplomb.

As usual, even in a non-vintage year (which, in spite of the calibre of the Beckett offering and Lovano's contribution, this certainly was), there were choices to be made. One of the more difficult was between the Mingus Dynasty Band, a scaled-down version of the several incarnations of the touring Mingus Dynasty Big Band, at the Everyman on Sunday, and the Vincent Herring Quartet, at the Triskel at the same time.

Anyone who opted for Herring was rewarded by a grooving, coruscating group who came in and, in jazz parlance, tore the place up. This was straight-ahead stuff, post bop with some contemporary bells and whistles, from a working band of long standing that was up from the start and, in Herring and pianist Anthony Wonsey, had a pair of soloists of the front rank.

Sharing the bill was singer Cormac Kenevey. Smoothly backed by the Phil Ware Trio, Kenevey's performance was polished and professional, with much the same material as he used here last year, but it was clear

from the audience before and during his concert that a buzz is beginning to develop around this singer.

Another singer, Kurt Elling, shared the Everyman on Saturday night with Golson and saved it from being a write-off. There was a tiredness about his and his band's performance early on which suggested that his approach had finally congealed into routine. It was misleading; they were simply at the end of 10 weeks of touring and were almost out of emotional gas.

He shook it off eventually and produced the goods: compelling performances of *Body and Soul*, with lyrics by Elling set to tenor saxophonist Dexter Gordon's great solo, and the *pièce de résistance* - an absorbing *In the Wee Small Hours of the Morning*, with an introduction based on one by Keith Jarrett, again with Elling lyrics. With them - and notwithstanding the fact that he has visited Ireland several times and familiarity has bred a blasé feeling about him - he underlined that he is not only an exceptional singer but also an extremely literate one.

Finally, the festival's award this year to Sean Carpio recognises the fact that a generation of talented young musicians is emerging here; people like last year's recipient of the award, Dylan Rynhart, Nick Roth, Greg Felton, Daniel Jacobsen and others. As ventures such as Fuzzy Logic, the Kai Big Band, Cortisol and ZoiD have shown, they're a resource waiting to be tapped by using - that word again - imagination. It's time the festival did something more than hand them awards and engagements in outlying venues.

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a Beckett Centenary tribute, *Beginning To End*. Written by long-time Swiss resident, guitarist Christy Doran, and bassist Ronan Guilfoyle, this was a joint commission by the Guinness Jazz Festival and Kilkenny Arts Week, which premiered in Kilkenny last August.

In evoking the bleak, pointless, surreal, repetitive, haunting, exasperating and, despite that, humorous edge of Beckett's vision, the music was a striking echo of the texts. These came from several sources, including *Happy Days*, *Waiting for Godot* and, in a brilliantly sustained, long performance, Beckett's final radio play, *Cascando*. The music also caught