

ARTS & IDEAS/CULTURAL DESK

JAZZ REVIEW; Putting On the Dance Style of New Orleans

By BEN RATLIFF

Jazz, basically, is musicians firing intelligence tests at seated audiences, communicating wordlessly among themselves. And that's O.K.: this has been the language of serious jazz performance for more than 50 years. So it's amazing to get a glimpse of jazz serving, or at least referring to, a social function.

At one of the high points in Wednesday's set by Donald Harrison's Congo Nation Tribe at the Jazz Standard, the band was playing the New Orleans Mardi Gras standard "Hey Pocky Way." Mr. Harrison, the alto saxophonist, and Christian Scott, the trumpeter, approached each other onstage and enacted a battle dance of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indians; it's an old dance and part of a lived culture.

Mr. Harrison, an alto saxophone player who became best known in the 1980's when he played in a band with the trumpeter Terence Blanchard, has been down this road before. In 1989 he made an album called "Indian Blues," investigating the world of his father, Donald Harrison Sr., who had the position of big chief in one of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Indian societies. The album took Creole chants, put them with jazz harmony and New Orleans parade rhythm and became startlingly meaningful. Since Mr. Harrison's father died a few years ago, the saxophonist himself has become big chief of the same tribe, and he's playing similar music with a new band, including some very young New Orleans players.

Without a doubt, it was ritual music: the rhythm section (Carl Allen on drums, Chief Howard Ricks on percussion, Zaccai Curtis on piano and Luques Curtis on bass) could have extended their teasing second-line vamps for hours. But Mr. Harrison is enough of a bandleader to impose his will on it and turn it into jazz, going chromatic on a blues number, salting a passage of rapid soloing with the "outside" notes of the horn.

Mr. Harrison's younger sidemen -- the Curtis brothers and Mr. Scott, who is his cousin -- were tremendously skilled with a bravado now scarce in jazz. The leader was by far the most advanced improviser. Yet there was no imbalance; it didn't matter. The tunes, including parade classics, Mr. Harrison's own melodies and a version of "Cherokee" set over a second-line rhythm in a nice, easy tempo, were indestructible and defined by rhythm. The set was all deep, historical fun.