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Section: LIFESTYLE

MARSALIS' HORN BRINGS DANCERS TO THEIR FEET

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This wasn't a typical jazz performance or a typical jazz audience, but one thing's for sure: It made everyone smile.

On Monday, Wynton Marsalis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra brought their traveling dance school to the cavernous James L. Knight Center in Miami. With its spring tour, "For Dancers Only," the LCJO is determined to take jazz back to its populist roots by playing the kind of big-band dances not seen since the ballroom days of Roseland and the Steel Pier.

The performance evoked the past, but it had the energy and edge of the present. It wasn't an exercise in mere nostalgia, with the band running through stock arrangements for couples to embrace their lost youth. About two dozen young swing dancers, most decked out in classic '40s togs, were on hand, and after a few tentative steps their exuberance helped give the evening its tone of serious fun. By the end of the evening hundreds of dancers ranging in age from 12 to 75 were laughing, moving and sweating on the dance floor. What other kind of music can bring such a wide range of people together without antagonism or irony?

The tunes were a blend of familiar classics (Take the A Train, Stompin' at the Savoy) and new pieces written expressly for this tour. The classic Fletcher Henderson arrangement of Jelly Roll Morton's King Porter Stomp led into the roiling Afro-Cuban rhythms of Rene Hernandez's Zambia, followed by the velvet suavity of singer Milt Grayson. When this trim, dapper man with pomaded hair opened his mouth, the audience was audibly stunned by his rich, mahogany baritone. In the second half of the nearly three-hour concert, a circle formed for the fancy dancers to strut their stuff, and Judy **Drucker**, whose **Concert Association of Florida** presented the event, even took a turn in the center ring.

The conditions weren't ideal for listening, with a booming, bass-heavy sound system, and it might have been nice to hear more ballads mixed with the rug-cutters. But beyond the flips, kicks and swirling skirts of the young dancers, there was some terrific playing. The trombonists, led by Wycliffe Gordon, were in fine form, the four trumpets traded exciting solos, and drummer Herlin Riley dug a deep, rhythmic groove.

If you think jazz is the dull recital of one inward-looking solo after another, this show would have changed your mind. And if you think Wynton Marsalis isn't one of the most inspired and dynamic trumpeters of our time, you should have stayed late for his extraordinary five-minute solo on the LCJO's encore tune, Perdido. It was almost a private concert as he rebuilt the Juan Tizol-Duke Ellington classic with a blues-tinted solo of such logical, flowing structure that his improvisations seemed to take the shape of fully formed paragraphs.

The audience danced and listened and perfectly understood Marsalis' message of bringing jazz back to the people. He received -- and deserved -- the biggest ovation of the night.

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