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NY CULTURE | July 15, 2011

Vince Giordano and the Underground Nighthawk Boogie

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By WILL FRIEDWALD

Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks

Sofia's (at the Hotel Edison)
221 W. 46th St., (212) 719-5799
Mondays and Tuesdays



Enlarge Image Alan Nahigian

Vince Giordano leads his 11-piece big band in Times Square.

Vince Giordano is Hollywood's go-to guy whenever someone is needed to authentically re-create vintage jazz or pop music—as you can hear, and often see as well, in "Boardwalk Empire," "The Aviator," "Mildred Pierce" and dozens of other films and TV shows. What isn't as well known is that Mr. Giordano leads his 11-piece big band twice a week at this subterranean spot in Times Square, where attractive dancers and considerably less-so

music nerds congregate to hear spot-on interpretations of jazz-age classics and period popular songs. Boasting regular soloists like Jon-Eric Kellso (trumpet), Dan Levinson (clarinet), Andy Stein (violin) and the leader himself on practically everything else (particularly the low-register instruments), the Nighthawks are one of New York's musical treasures of any genre.

For most of the 30-plus years that Mr. Giordano, now 59, has been leading the Nighthawks, he's had the whole field to himself—no one else was willing to make the commitment to assemble the world's largest library of vintage orchestrations and then gather, and in some cases, train, the best players in the city to master the music of the immediate pre-swing era. Now there are at least half a dozen jazz-age type bands playing frequently around the city, and it seems that the competition, as in the Apple vs. Android wars, has merely made the Nighthawks stronger.



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Two weeks ago, the Ghost Train Orchestra played at the Highline Ballroom, and while they're a spirited group of mostly young players, they have nothing like the Nighthawks' polish. Michael Arenella's Dreamland Orchestra, contrastingly, offers smooth re-creations of 1920s dance sides with a solid two-beat bounce. Still, no one has the raw power to go up against the Nighthawks.

Mr. Giordano's bandsmen play with remarkable precision. It's the kind you can only achieve by working regularly, week after week, year in and year out. And it's propelled by the almost manic energy of the leader, who drives the band fearlessly forward with his aluminum string bass, brass bass (tuba), and bass saxophone. You wonder who's working harder: the musicians or the dancers in front of the band who test their endurance by trying to keep up.

No one else can compete with Mr. Giordano in terms of the sheer variety of the music. He can jump from "Singing Pretty Songs," a red-hot New Orleans-style stomp by Luis Russell and Henry Red Allen, to Cole Porter's "Anything Goes" (reminding us that the song is also being heard nightly across the street in the hit revival). It's particularly satisfying when the band comes up with a number that's simultaneously a pop tune and an butt-kicker, like the hard-swinging, minor-key stomp on "One More Time."

But we ain't heard nothin' yet: One highlight of Tuesday's performance at Sofia's was "Salty," a nautical-but-nice medley of old-time sea chanties set in a snappy foxtrot circa 1926. It's hard to imagine a period when anybody would actually want to kick up their heels to "Asleep in the Deep," but the dancers loved it. Then there was a triumvirate of motifs transcribed from the soundtracks of "Little Rascals" two-reelers, which is brilliant theme music; it went over even though many of Mr. Giordano's increasingly younger listeners may have no first-hand experience of Spanky and Alfalfa. Yet the youngest guys in the room were probably the Anderson brothers, two 24-year-old Juilliard grads who subbed in the reed section, offering some clarinet-on-clarinet violence on "Crazy Rhythm."

As the Nighthawks play the music of the 1920s, it doesn't sound like something that died out before the Andersons' grandfather was born, but rather like a music in a constant state of creation and reinvention.

Marcus Roberts Trio

Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola

Broadway at 60th Street, (212) 258-9595

Through Sunday

The prodigious Floridian pianist has done full-length tributes to Duke Ellington and Scott Joplin, but it's hard to believe he's never recorded a whole set of Monk. (The legendary composer does figure prominently on Mr. Roberts's "Alone with Three Giants" and his witty Christmas album "A Prayer for Peace.") His all-Monk set at Dizzy's is distinguished by heavily melodic contributions from bassist Rodney Jones (as on "Blue Monk") and drummer Jason Marsalis (who percussively stated the opening melody on "Green Chimneys"). When he wrote "Evidence," Monk deconstructed and then reconstructed the standard "Just You, Just Me," and Mr. Roberts has now done the same to that tune and nine more Monk standards, generally smoothing their jagged edges and negotiating their wormhole-like open spaces. He renders "Let's Call This" with a Basie-esque lightness and refashions "Bye-Ya" into more of a calypso than it already is.

Sam Yahel Trio

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Real- York

Weather Journal: Wind Whips But Still No Snow

Moderate winds will keep up through the evening Monday, meaning wind chill factors will remain slightly above single digits for much of Greater New York. They start to die around 11 p.m. Monday as weak low pressure passes south of the region.



Friend Who Backed Out of Staten Island Mom's Fatal Trip Speaks

Just days after a Staten Island mom was found dead in Turkey, a friend came forward to say she was supposed to have gone along on the voyage.



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The Village Vanguard

178 Seventh Ave. South, (212) 255-4037

Through Sunday

The versatile keyboardist, equally skilled on piano and Hammond B3 organ, is possibly best known for his album "Jazz Side of the Moon: The Music of Pink Floyd." He's become a Vanguard regular in recent years, and it's not hard to hear why: His improvised lines can be dense and abstract but they never stop swinging, and he delivers his thoughts in short, highly palatable phrases that are easy to process. In particular, his treatments of standards, like "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To" and "Moonlight and Vermont," both heard at the late show on Tuesday night, show a light touch no matter how heavy some of his ideas are, and a translucently melodic approach; the tunes may be understated, but they're never unclear. Mr. Yahel's trio, with bassist Matt Penman and drummer Jochen Rueckert, fits comfortably into the pantheon of Vanguard piano threesomes.

*Pablo Ziegler's Tango Conexion***Birdland**

315 W 44th St., (212) 581-3080

Through Saturday

Argentine Composer Pablo Ziegler rose to international attention as pianist for Tango colossus Ástor Piazzolla. Yet where Mr. Piazzolla was the innovator of the "nuevo tango," Mr. Ziegler's tango is even more nuevo—especially as played by his current quartet, co-starring Hector Del Curto on bandoneón, Pedro Giraud on bass and Jisoo Ok on cello. At various points, the quartet's music is as baroque and driven by counterpoint as anything by Bach, and at the same time it also makes extensive use of jazz-style improvised solos. The rhythms are so fast, so angular, so staccato and tricky that it would take some kind of super-cyborg to dance to them (the "Tangonator"). In fact, it's to the credit of Buenos Aires-based vocalist Sandra Luna, making her New York debut, that she can sing to this music, which she does with a deep, resonant voice and surefire rhythmic footing.

*Summer Broadway Festival***The Town Hall**

123 W. 43rd St., (212) 307-4100

July 18 & 25

The first of three shows in this year's festival, "Broadway Winners" demonstrated that the most original and least predictable moments are inevitably the highlights of these musical theater-centric concerts: Scott Coulter transformed the normally anthemic "Sound of Music" into an intimate lullaby; Eddie Korbich retooled "I Love a Cop" (from "Fiorello") for the age of same-sex marriage; Marc Kudisch made "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" sound more like Buddy Holly than Howard Keel; and country star cum Broadway lead Larry Gatlin made "Les Miserables" sound listenable. Yet the hands-down winner was scene-stealing newcomer Oakley Boycott, who reanimated "He Was My Boyfriend," Mel Brooks's ace parody of Kurt-und-Bert from the overlooked score to "Young Frankenstein," including a monologue and a shameless succession of mock Teutonic one-liners. The remaining two shows in the festival, "Broadway's Rising Stars" (July 18) and especially "All Singin', All Dancin'" (July 25) are strongly recommended.

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