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Theatre in Review: *Le Jazz Hot: How the French Saved Jazz (59E59)*

"If it weren't for France, jazz would be dead." This statement, made by Quincy Jones to musicians **Peter and Will Anderson**, genuinely startles. Yes, the French have always adored jazz -- but the idea that they gave the kiss of life to an ailing art form at first seems hard to credit. (Certainly, they did nothing for rock and roll, their one contribution to the genre being the Zelig-like Johnny Hallyday.) But today, the words "Le Jazz Hot" sound more like a cue for a Julie Andrews number than a significant cultural statement.



Peter Anderson (clarinet), Will Anderson (sax), Luc Decker (drums), Clovis Nicolas (bass), and Alex Wintz (guitar). Photo: Eileen O'Donnell

As it happens, Jones, and, by extension, the Andersons, know what they are talking about. Thus, *Le Jazz Hot: How the French Saved Jazz*, a delightful mélange of cold facts and hot licks that explores the transatlantic traffic that kept this most-American of musical forms hopping. In a packed 90-minute entertainment, they touch on such American expatriates as Sidney Bechet and Bud Powell, who spent significant portions of their careers in Paris; local talents like Django Reinhardt, who made their own original contributions; masters like Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie, who were revered there; and fabulous one-offs like Josephine Baker, who paved the way for black American entertainers in France.

Much of this information is provided via archival video; an interview with an older Duke Ellington fascinates, as do clips from *Paris Blues*, a 1961 romance, scored by Ellington, starring Paul Newman and Sidney Poitier as jazzmen, who, between sets, romance Joanne Woodward and Diahann Carroll along the Left Bank. And the photos of Baker in her simple jungle-queen costumes, seemingly dressed in nothing but bananas, have to be seen to be believed.

The Andersons are both reed specialists -- they frequently preside over Thursday night cocktail parties at 59E59 -- and here they are joined by **Alex Wintz** on guitar, **Clovis Nicolas** on bass, and **Luc Decker** on drums. I must add that all five are impeccable talents -- the proper

French response to that is, "Ça va sans dire" -- and they prove remarkably conversant with an array of jazz styles, from swing to bebop to bluesy ballads. Unsurprisingly, most of the numbers have a French accent. These include a lightly swinging "C'est Si Bon," a Reinhardt number titled "Rhythm Futur," which involves racing up and down the scales, and was written to get past the Nazis' objection to jazz; Gillespie's "Afro Paris;" and even a successful attempt at swinging Debussy's "Clair de Lune." In some ways, the loveliest moments are "April in Paris," rendered as a guitar solo, and "La Vie en Rose," featuring only the Andersons.

With their wholesome looks and deadpan wit -- they look like a pair of young Jimmy Stewarts -- Will and Peter Anderson make an apt pair of musical hosts. 59E59's Theatre C has been converted into a cabaret for this presentation, and the seating is wildly cramped. But drinks are available, the talent on display is authentic, and, in addition to hearing some marvelous music, you may learn something. Certainly, you may be convinced that the mid-20th-century revival of jazz is the result of the most significant Franco-American pact of all. -- **David Barbour**

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