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Jazz, Cabaret Events Celebrate Longevity

Only the savviest musical organizations survive long enough to celebrate major anniversaries, and two of them achieved landmarks over the weekend:

Chicago Jazz Orchestra:

Thirty years ago, Jeff Lindberg and Steve Jensen launched an experiment in swing they called the Jazz Members Big Band. Jensen's death, in 1997 at age 50, might have marked the end of the venture, but Lindberg and friends pushed it forward under a new name: Chicago Jazz Orchestra.

On Sunday afternoon, the CJO toasted its three decades in front of a packed house at Thorne Auditorium, offering a reprise of its popular "Exquisitely for Ella" program.

Revisiting the classic "Songbook" albums that Ella Fitzgerald recorded for producer Norman Granz, the concert amounted to a festival of the song. Three noted Chicago vocalists shared the marquee, with Lindberg's CJO reviving the brilliant "Songbook" orchestrations of Nelson Riddle, Billy May and others. And though a few orchestral tours de force might have been appropriate for the occasion, the singing of Dee Alexander, Frieda Lee and Spider Saloff certainly conveyed the high sprits of the anniversary.

Each singer had something significant to say, but Alexander indisputably came closest to capturing the airborne scat virtuosity that was at the core of Fitzgerald's art. Even so, Alexander was no mere mimic, bringing a gritty blues sensibility and a knack for novelty sound to virtually every Fitzgerald classic.

To hear Alexander stretching lines like taffy on "Oh Lady Be Good!" or scatting exuberantly on "Blue Skies" was to recognize her prowess in extending Fitzgerald's legacy.

Singer Lee, a longtime CJO collaborator in truth showed closer musical resemblance to Sarah Vaughan than to Fitzgerald. Nevertheless, she hardly could have sounded more gauzily seductive in "Embraceable You."

Finally, Saloff attained her greatest singing in Duke Ellington's "Cotton Tail," her lightning-quick riffs and ultra-high-register cries a fitting tribute to Fitzgerald. Elsewhere, though, Saloff offered an excess of vibrato and show-big mannerism.

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