

Inspired vocals from Mark Murphy

By Philip Elwood
EXAMINER MUSIC CRITIC

LAST WEEKEND, singer Joe Williams, enduring persistent respiratory problems, canceled his participation in NPR's Saturday evening tribute to Marian McPartland as well as his scheduled six-day gig at Yoshi's this week.

By Monday, Jason Olaine of

Yoshi's had lined up a remarkable pair of bookings to replace Williams. Tuesday, singer Mark Murphy opened a three-night run at the Oakland club; Friday through Sunday, Jon Hendricks will headline. Multi-Grammy winner saxist Joe Henderson is appearing as a "special guest" with both singers.

On Tuesday, as soon as pianist Larry Dunlap swung into the "Diz & Bird" bebop introduction to "All

the Things You Are" on Murphy's opening set, it was obvious this was going to be an evening of informal, inspired, good-time jazz. Murphy took off on the vocal, Henderson joined in on tenor, and the crowd whooped it up.

Jazz has been defined as the "sound of surprise" and in swapping riffs — voice to sax and back again — Murphy and Henderson were obviously having a grand time

surprising each other, improvising as a duo, creating jazz.

Murphy's often ingenious use of broken rhythms — and, indeed, meters — in his vocal renditions is matched by a keen sense of dynamics, an aspect of musical performance which virtually all of the young scat-singing, jazz vocalese purveyors overlook. When he sings a gorgeous "Tribute to Rio" medley (songs of Ivan Lins and Antonio Carlos Jobim), Murphy emphasizes each selection's melodic beauty by gently modulating the volume.

"Winning the lottery is almost as good as your first night in Rio," says Murphy, who knows; he improvises comfortably in Portuguese and (in fact) handles many European languages with ease.

On the romantic Brazilian songs, Scott Steed, bass, and David Rokeach, drums, join Dunlap's rhythmic keyboard harmonies (mostly acoustic, with a touch of



Mark Murphy: A keen sense of dynamics creates the "sound of surprise."

electric) to provide a light, lush accompaniment both for Murphy and Henderson.

Murphy's first recording, a Capitol LP, came on the market nearly 40 years ago, in the waning of the "cool jazz" era. He reflected, musically, on those years during Tuesday's set at Yoshi's by rendering impressions of some of the themes drawn from Miles Davis' "Birth of the Cool" recordings. Notable was "Boplicity," with its long melodic

line flowing through the chords rather than on top of them. Murphy also had great fun in singing Stephen Sondheim's "I Remember," which emerges (as do many of Sondheim's songs) as what could be called "refined rap."

Jon Hendricks and Friends open Friday at Yoshi's with Eric Lewis, piano; Paul Gill, bass; Eric Allen on drums, and Henderson on tenor sax. Box office: (510) 238-9200.

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