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REVIEW

By Don Heckman
Special To The Times

John Hammond is one of the Southland's great jazz treasures. No, not the blues-folk singer John Hammond Jr.; not even his father, the legendary jazz producer. John Hammond, the pianist - no relation to the above -- is a veteran jazz artist who has worked with everyone from George Benson and Carmen McRae to Michael Jackson and Cuba Gooding. His piano playing is heard flowing from the fingers of Jeff and Beau Bridges in "The Fabulous Baker Boys," and he had the enviable task of coaching and producing Michelle Pfeiffer's vocal numbers in the same film.

On Friday night at Fitzgerald's in the Hilton Woodland Hills, Hammond was at his usual spot behind a 9-foot Yamaha grand piano, leading a first rate jazz ensemble that included alto saxophonist Kim Richmond, trumpeter Clay Jenkins, bassist Jim Hughart and drummer Ralph Penland. It's a familiar position for Hammond, who performs at Fitzgerald's three to four nights a week as the room's resident musical director and band leader.

But listening to the confident, smoothly articulated fashion in which he led his ensemble through a set of standard tunes ranging from "I'm Old Fashioned" to "Don't Blame Me" and "All of You," only increased the mystery of why this fine player - on the scene for decades - has not attained wider visibility. Hammond's ballad work was filled with subtle harmonic coloration; his midtempo soloing recalled the brisk, two-handed chording of Red Garland; and his support of the other players added depth and perspective to each of their offerings.

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Sad, Sweet Note on the Night Air

By Al Martinez

It happens only once in a while, when it's late at night and you're feeling kind of mellow, and a golden trumpet is blowing memories toward a misty crescent moon. You begin to feel like you're somewhere else, and it's a long time ago. San Francisco in the '50s, not Woodland Hills in the 2000s. We were just leaving a small jazz club called Fitzgerald's in the Hilton Hotel after a couple of hours of listening to some of the sweetest music I've heard in a long time, the kind of lonely, drifting sounds that draw you in like a kid following a dream. And it's just about to end.

Cinelli was with me and so was our Teengirl, who was raised on rock 'n' roll and was wondering what the big deal is about jazz. You can't really explain a music that emerges from the soul, but I said it was America's own riff that grew out of hope and misery and the lingering notion that life is better when the sun goes down. She left the place in another world, like the rest of us. It was magic.

Jazz legend John Hammond was at the piano, with Jim Hughart on bass and Ralph Penland on drums. Buddy Childers and Steve Carr swung by later in the evening, when the night was deepening and the crowd was beginning to thin. Every one of them is an icon in the world of jazz. A woman known only as Maggie of Topanga told us about the club and said we'd better hurry if we wanted to hear Hammond's music, because they were going to shut it off on May 1. The room would still be there but jazz would give way to other kinds of music to draw a younger audience. Loud stuff. That's what the MTV Generation likes.

At first, I couldn't imagine a jazz club in Woodland Hills, but I guess the kind of music that critic Winthrop Sargeant called "a thrilling communion with the primitive soul" can be played anywhere. In a small club, an alley, a symphony hall or on a steamy night in the Louisiana bayous. I was used to the old San Francisco North Beach dubs that always seemed to be entwined with ribbons of fog, creating the kind of moody atmosphere that could melt the heart of a troll. I heard Billie Holiday one night at the Blackhawk. It was two hours past show time and Cal Tjader was doing his best to fill in on the vibes, when she finally wandered in, totally strung out. She just started singing without saying anything, and "God Bless the Child" whispered out like a prayer over the city. What a night.

Fitzgerald's doesn't have the same kind of atmosphere, but jazz creates its own environment. To say that Hammond is unhappy about the room switching over to another kind of music is to minimize his deep anger. Here's a guy who's been making music all his life, and jazz is as much a part of him as paint was to Picasso. "Corporate greed is what it's all about," Hammond says between sets. It's not a big room, but there's an open mezzanine overhead that creates an illusion of size. "They're making money, so why spend it on us? That's the bottom line." His wife, Wini, who works at the Hilton, says John only found out for sure that they were ending the jazz program when the owner of the grand piano called to say the hotel wasn't going to pay for its rental anymore. I wanted to ask hotel manager Chandler Vadehra about it, but he didn't return my phone calls.

Hammond's resume reads like a book of music. He's soloed or conducted symphony orchestras from London to Houston, performed or recorded with a list of singers that includes Frank Sinatra, Mel Torme, Carmen McRae, Sarah Vaughan and so many others it would fill a page to name them all. Ditto film and television and gigs from New Orleans to L.A., and a lot of other venues I've had to leave out. Music has filled his life, but jazz is his first love. Watching him play, gray hair turned silver under the dim light, is to observe a master at work. He hunches so close to the keyboard that he seems to form a single entity with the piano, as they absorb each other, body and soul. "It's a musical conversation," he says, explaining the improvisation of jazz, the instruments communicating with each other. "What you hear on anyone given night you won't hear again."