

Brookside Jazz's fine concerts pack the house

By JIM WINDELL

The Brookside Jazz Ensemble is one of the finest big jazz bands in Detroit. That wasn't their goal when they started out, however.

Like another fine jazz band of the last decade, the Brookside Jazz Ensemble began as a rehearsal band. It was to be a group of musicians who play together after their regular jobs to play some of the charts and arrangements of their own music.

That didn't last long after they gave their first public performance about 10 years ago.

The first Brookside Jazz Ensemble concert was given at Cranbrook and since then the ensemble has regularly performed two concerts each year. Sunday was the annual spring cabaret appearance in the Performing Arts Center at Cranbrook in Bloomfield Hills.

THESE CONCERTS are played before packed auditoriums for the express purpose of donating most of the proceeds back to the band's namesake — The Brookside School — as thanks for the use of school facilities for continuing rehearsals.

Vocalist Ursula Walker, who has sung with the band since it was organized, appeared in Sunday's concert. A celebrated Detroit jazz vocalist for many years, she has performed frequently with the Brookside Jazz Ensemble.

Stay extended for Lifeline

Lifeline, a five-piece musical group formerly known as Birch & Co., is appearing at Detroit's Top of the Pontiac.

The group's stay has been extended through June 16. Lifeline originally was scheduled to appear from May 1-June 3.

Members of Lifeline are Dan Birch on saxophone, flute and synthesizer; his wife Martha, lead vocalist and keyboardist; brother Bob Birch on sax and bass guitar; Dennis Harrison on percussion and drums; and vocalist Rebecca Evans.

Lifeline emphasizes slow music during its first set while people are still dining, then picks up the beat later for the dancers.

The group plays 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. Tuesdays-Thursday from 8:30 p.m. to 1:30 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

Chuck Muir's Top of the Pontiac provides dinner service beginning at 5:30 p.m. weekdays and 6 p.m. on Saturdays.

For more information or reservations, call 955-0200.

These Cranbrook concerts are social events that have people arriving three hours early to get a table and enjoy an indoor picnic and the free beer the band provides.

Besides beer and soft drinks, the band is generous with the music and on Sunday served up three hours of first-rate big band and vocal jazz. The camaraderie of the band members and the high caliber of musicianship made for an afternoon of jazz that was attractively swinging.

"THE MAJORITY of the band has been together for 10 years and we have had perhaps only one or two changes in personnel in the last five years. We meet once a week to rehearse and we are like a fraternity," said Curt Neumann, baritone saxophone player and one of the two men who founded the band.

"For us, we have the best of two worlds. We have as good a band as there is in Detroit and at the same time it is not a job. It's a social outlet and a love affair."

Their love affair with big band jazz was evident in the opener, a Stan Kenton swinger called "Granada Smoothie." Neumann's baritone put a

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nice bottom on the five-man sax section, but the number was muffled by the yet-to-be adjusted sound system. The sound system got straightened out and the band followed up the Kenton number with the Steely Dan tune, "FM," which Woody Herman has recorded.

Neumann said, "We use Herman's arrangement because Gary Anderson who arranged this for Herman is a friend of mine and sent me his arrangement."

"My Foolish Heart," done in an appropriate ballad style, segued into some jazz-rock, showing off the power and versatility of the band. John Hammer switched comfortably from acoustic to electric piano and showed a deceptively simple touch on the keyboards.

LATER IN another song, Hammer would begin in an Ellington vein and turn in a delightfully impish and teasing piano solo.

Ursula Walker finished out the first half of the program in front of the band with four contemporary songs. Billy Joel's "I Love You Just the Way You Are" got a honey-voiced, note-bending, going-over from the experienced jazz vocalist. For Ms. Walker, jazz singing involves two elements.

To me, jazz singing is taking a melody and doing something other than what is written with it. That something must be different each time you sing the song. If a song is all written out and rehearsed that is not jazz. It must be spontaneous.

The first singer Ms. Walker was aware of who could be considered a jazz singer was Sarah Vaughan. "I guess some people feel that Sarah Vaughan has influenced me and I do have great respect and admiration for her. But, the singer that I have listened to most over the years has been Carmen McRae.

"As far as phrasing goes she is the greatest. She knows how to tell a story and her phrasing is always meticulous. The lyric has always been important to me. A song has to tell a story and a singer does too," she said.

BESIDES TELLING a story, Ms. Walker knows how to improvise around a melody, like all jazz singers. She led off the second half of the Sunday concert, backed by her husband, Buddy Budson, on piano and a rhythm section.

Her improvisational talents were in evidence on each number, even the sad ballad "When Summer Turns to Snow." With just drummer Jerry McKenzie's deft brush work, Ms. Walker sang "Surrey with the Fringe on Top" at breakneck speed. This became an effective vehicle for her type of jazz, as she scatted a couple of choruses and then

traded four-and-eight-bar passages of improvisation with McKenzie. Drummer McKenzie, who is an alumnus of the Stan Kenton orchestra, was featured in several of the band's second-half numbers during the concert. His prowess as a drummer was showcased in Louis Bellson's "Quiet Riot," but McKenzie is one of the major reasons for this band's excellence on most numbers. Then two songs that are not usually associated with big bands were reeled off with several classy solos.

BOB MOJICA, who handles most of the trumpet solo work, played flugelhorn to give an outstanding account of himself during "Green Dolphin Street." Alto saxophonist Dick Kozan helped to make Eddie Harris' "Freedom Jazz Dance" one of the most exciting of the band's repertoire.

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