

## **Jack at Jax**

### **Jack Sheldon at Jax Bar and Grill**

November 10, 2005

Jax Bar and Grill in Glendale is something of an LA landmark. It is a long, narrow room roughly bisected by a small, low stage (bar in front, dining area in back); a classic, upscale tavern of the sort common Back East replete with tin ceiling, brass bar, and aproned wait staff in pressed white shirts and ties.

Jack Sheldon and his California Cool Quartet have been holding court here for a number of years and, in fact, Sheldon refers to Jax as his “home base.” Thursday it was SRO with an audience largely composed of over-40, graying hepcats (the prototypical LA jazz audience) along with a smattering of younger nightclubbers.

It is no exaggeration to dub Jack Sheldon an icon of LA jazz. In the fifties he helped develop the trumpet sound (along with Chet Baker) for the school of bop which came to be known as West Coast “cool.” Later he became one of the most sought-after session players in the then-thriving LA film/TV/record industry. In the process, he cut hundreds of sides and worked with a list of players that reads like a who’s-who of West Coast jazz. His clear, sinewy, laid-back lines have graced the grooves of some of my favorite recordings (check out the classic Art Pepper set “The Return of Art Pepper” from 1957). Sheldon is also well-known as something of a clown and a not-inconsequential vocal stylist.

On this night in Glendale, the California Cool Quartet was, in actuality, an organ trio consisting of Sheldon on trumpet and vocals with organist Joe Bagg and drummer Dave Tull.

The set began and was punctuated with Sheldon's comic banter. It is perhaps unfortunate that Sheldon's notoriety today may be as much attributable to his sardonic, bawdy wit as to his formidable trumpet work, but I have to admit, the guy is as funny as anyone I've heard on any bandstand anywhere.

After an impromptu comic preamble, the band launched into the Tadd Dameron bop standard "Lady Bird." Sheldon had clearly not warmed up and his playing was stiff, but he seemed unconcerned and as the set unfolded his tone and technique fully emerged.

The set was comprised of standards played in "head arrangement" form ("Night in Tunisia", "The Shadow of Your Smile", etc.) but it was clear that the musicians had done a fair amount of playing together and that Bagg and Tull were not just a pickup band.

There was no discussion of tune selection, key, or solo order between tunes and, when trading fours or eights with the drummer (as was the case on several numbers), they never stumbled.

Once warmed up, Sheldon's playing was masterful: intricate, crisp, and subtly shaded. Although in his seventies, he still spends a lot of time exploring the horn's high register

and never cracked a note. Like all the great bop soloists, his phrases were full of twists and turns, but he always ended up on his feet. He also turned in compelling vocal interpretations of “Just Friends” and the lesser-known “Where Do You Start?” Sheldon appeared in good health and spirits, if maybe a bit bored.

Tull and Bagg are both top-notch accompanists. Their keen ears and considerable chops made for delightful interplay that rendered each number a fluid 3-way conversation.

The organ combo format gives the drummer plenty of space to fill and Dave Tull took full advantage of it, playing in a free, melodic style that incorporated the full range of the kit’s colors. His cymbal work was especially inspired. His ride cymbal had a nice, dark china-type quality when he dug into it. He has a lovely light touch and supple wrist and, whether soloing or in the background, always laid down an insistent and solid pulse.

Joe Bagg is probably the hottest young organist in LA and for good reason. In the organ combo format, the organist is effectively two cats in one – the left hand pumps out the bass while the right hand comps or solos. The organist’s left hand is almost more important than his right and has to be rock solid. Bagg never dropped the ball. His bass lines tightly smoldered even while laying down the changes or tearing off blistering runs with the right hand. His sophisticated playing is infused with shades of Mel Rhyne and Dr. Lonnie Smith. The group’s sound could have benefited from a real B3 rig though; the Nord Electro digital keyboard Bagg used sounded reasonably convincing when he was comping, but during his solos - particularly when pushed into overdrive – it sounded

harsh and brittle. He obviously chose to use the Nord due to the spatial constraints of Jax's tiny stage though.

The audience was attentive and responsive, and had clearly come to see Sheldon. Interestingly, the younger audience members seemed better able to relate to Sheldon's singing and comic rants than to his playing.

I was left with the overall impression that Sheldon was not particularly serious about the gig and was in fact, pretty indifferent. This is understandable given the length and breadth of the man's achievements – he probably does not get very fired up about playing a little watering-hole such as Jax and probably believes, as do I, that he should be doing the concert hall circuit. But it is, I think, in some ways unfortunate and a disservice to his own artistry to give the audience less than his absolute best.

Having said that, I did thoroughly enjoy the music and felt privileged to be there to hear this jazz legend live and in person, the way jazz ought to be heard. As I like to say, if it ain't live, it ain't jazz. // =PL