

JAZZ REVIEW

Got to hand it to Lage, band: They think, play differently

By Howard Reich
TRIBUNE CRITIC

A fresh new sound breezed into the Jazz Showcase on Thursday evening, and judging by the enthusiasm of the audience response, it will be back.

Guitarist Julian Lage has played Chicago before, as sideman. But this time he led the unusual—and unusually alluring—band that appears on his recent CD, “Sounding Point.” The power of this music proved significantly greater in concert than on the recording, and that’s only partly because the touring ensemble does not include banjoist Bela Fleck.

More important, the Julian Lage Group conveys a radiance of tone and a subtlety of voicing that must be heard in person to be fully absorbed. What often sounds static and predictable on disc becomes dramatically more vibrant and detailed in concert. And though Lage’s quintet occasionally repeats song structures and lapses into nearly metro-nomic rhythm, for the most part this band thrives on invention.

For starters, jazz listeners are not accustomed to encountering a guitar-led band that features a cellist and includes a percussionist who uses not sticks but hands. Nor is the offbeat instrumentation a gimmick. Each of Lage’s colleagues contributes a distinctive message, from Aristides Rivas’ rhapsodic

legato phrases on cello to Tupac Mantilla’s phenomenally creative percussion (he can produce atmospheric sounds literally by crumpling a piece of paper). Add to the mix Jorge Roeder’s buoyant pizzicato playing on bass and Ben Roeth’s gauzy timbres on alto saxophone, and

Julian Lage Group

When: 8 and 10 p.m. Saturday; 4, 8 and 10 p.m. Sunday

Where: Jazz Showcase, 806 S. Plymouth Ct.

Tickets: \$20-\$25; 312-360-0234

Lage’s quintet stands apart from most contemporary jazz units.

So does his approach to composition. Utterly oblivious to conventions of genre, he draws freely from bluegrass, gypsy, classical and, oh yes, jazz idioms (sometimes within the same opus). That he commands the instrumental technique to address each of these musical languages helps considerably.

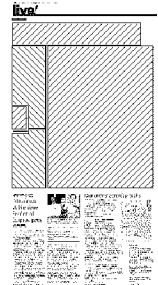
There’s a palpable joyousness to this music, an optimism and rhythmic buoyancy that help uninitiated listeners join Lage for the ride. Yet for those who pay close attention, this carefully orchestrated music—with its pinpoint cues and meticulously controlled gradations of tempo—provides a rush of ideas to consider.

Listen to Lage playing “Bluegrass Under-score,” the guitarist throwing off mercurial runs while the band counters with multiple melodic strands.

Yes, the virtuosity of bluegrass guitar is plain to hear, but it’s set against plush textures more typically heard in classical chamber music.

In “Room to Play,” the group offered an undulating, softly swelling music that only could have been honed by musicians who spend long hours working together—and enjoy it.

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Jazz guitarist Julian Lage's writing draws from several genres, including bluegrass, gypsy and classical.