THE AUSTRALIAN

Courtney Pine…PHOTO COURTESY AUSTRALIAN JAZZ MUSEUM

Published in The Australian December 10, 1987

Pine: simply sensational

10/12/87

Jazz

Courtney Pine Quintet
The Basement, Sydney

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BRITISH saxophonist Courtney Pine opened his Australian tour with a performance that could only be described as sensational, both musically and in terms of audience reaction.

As we've been used to a procession of individual artists from overseas, backed up by off-the-cuff local rhythm sections, it was instructive for a change to hear a working group that is setting some pace in international jazz; the music had a clear direction, and was played with absolute artistic certainty.

Besides Pine, 23, the musicians included Mart Mondesir (drums), Gary Crosby (bass), Orphy Robinson (vibes and marimba) and Jo Bashorun (piano) – all dressed in elegant black suits, despite an oppressively hot night at The Basement.

Courtney Pine has been hyped-up as Britain's answer to Wynton Marsalis – the British saying, in effect, that if the United States can have a brilliant young black star, then Britain can also produce one.

Marsalis, a trumpeter, is, however, a somewhat conservative figure, who plays jazz as Miles Davis did in the 1950s, and spends some of his time performing relatively simple classical works. Pine, on the other hand, is very modern and contemporary, playing jazz that most people would consider avant garde. His approach certainly puts into better perspective the Australian jazz avant-garde. Local saxophonist Mark Simmonds, for example – the closest player we have to Courtney Pine, with the possible exception of Dale Barlow at his fiery best – is usually regarded as outrageous and intimidating, but he would not be out of place on the stage next to Pine.

I have to say that Pine's first set passed me by. The volume level was alienating – it was very, very loud – and the quintet performed with such power that there were few subtleties in the music.

The second set was more focused. In the first tune, Bashorun played a vigorous solo, before Pine played the solo of the night on tenor saxophone. It was not so much a solo – an improvised line in the jazz tradition – as a dynamic experience, an expression of demonic energy. It almost lifted the roof off The Basement.

This was followed by the tune, *If Only For One Night*, on which Pine played soprano saxophone. Even if this was a quieter and more lyrical piece, the trajectory was similar – towards powerful, unbridled expression.

The set also included withering references to the standards, *St Thomas*, *There Will Never Be Another You*, and *Straight, No Chaser*, as well as an attractive version of a traditional African piece, *Zaire*. Pine and his group moved freely in and out of these structures, with all the players making long, individual statements, sometimes unaccompanied.

To my mind, Courtney Pine's music illustrated the now widening gap between old jazz – based on the concise expression of melodic ideas over sedate rhythms – appealing to older people and contemporary jazz – based on the expression of energy, and at a dynamic level close to heavy rock music – appealing, naturally, to the younger audience.

Pine and his Quintet play in Melbourne tonight and Saturday, Adelaide on Sunday and return to The Basement for two performances next Monday and Tuesday.