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MUSIC: JAZZ REVIEW

## Holding his own as a jazz legend

### James Moody has an air of joy

By Howard Reich  
Tribune arts critic

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At this late date, the number of certifiable jazz legends before the public has become alarmingly small, but at least one of them still is playing hard.

Though he turned 80 in March, James Moody doesn't look or sound it. Maybe there's something about jazz--its youthful energy or its voracious hunger for fresh ideas--that keeps one of its best practitioners current. Or maybe it's just that Moody, who played in Dizzy Gillespie's big bebop band in the late 1940s and has hasn't stopped swinging ever since, long has personified everything that is buoyantly life-affirming about the music.

Whatever the reason, the set that Moody and his quartet played Tuesday night at the Jazz Showcase had an air of joy and celebration about it, whether Moody was blowing fire on tenor saxophone, sculpting complex figurations on flute or singing whimsically in one of the many comic songs that are integral to his repertoire.

Anyone who wondered whether Moody still can make his way around his horn should have checked out his opening volley--a big, bluesy, barreling version of John Coltrane's "Mr. PC." Hitting the primary notes aggressively from the outset and picking up the tempo and intensity from there, Moody reaffirmed his position as one of the mightiest bebop tenorists still playing. Moreover, the way he re-engineered the main theme--fracturing its rhythms, inverting its phrases and otherwise rearranging a well-worn jazz anthem--attested to the high level of his craft.

Here was classic bebop style, though slightly retooled for a modern era, the frenetic style of the old school tempered by moments of silence and sleekly conceived counter melodies.

The sheer creativity, tonal plushness and ingenious phraseology of this performance inspired pianist

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Michael Kocour--a former Chicagoan who has been collaborating with Moody for years--into crafting possibly the most hard-driving solo this listener has heard from him. Though Kocour, who now teaches at Arizona State University in Tempe, tends to be a comparatively relaxed soloist, the heated nature and harmonically complex vocabulary of his playing represented a new high point for him.

Moody happens to play flute as persuasively as he does tenor, but even longtime fans might have been surprised by the enormous size and slow pace of his vibrato in the ballad-like introduction to another bebop-era warhorse, "Cherokee."

If there was a slight misstep in this set, it came in the old standard "Secret Love," in which Moody often interrupted the glorious tune with surprisingly trivial snippets, such as a quote from Ferde Grofe's "Grand Canyon Suite" (of all things).

Yet that's a small quibble in an evening that overflowed with deeply musical, melodically astute solo work. That the set also included the characteristically adroit playing of bassist Larry Gray and the consistently imaginative accompaniments of the young drummer Jesse Nolan--a real find--only heightened the appeal of this show.

James Moody Quartet

When: Through Sunday

Where: Jazz Showcase, 59 W. Grand Ave.

Price: \$20-\$25; 312-670-2473

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[hreich@tribune.com](mailto:hreich@tribune.com)

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