

The review was run in the Boston Globe Arts section on Wednesday, January 30, 2002 under the heading: ON BALANCE, BIG & PHAT IMPRESSES, by Bob Blumenthal

A few years back, the Big & Phat Jazz Orchestra held a regular Monday night slot at The Tam. The band has been without a home of late, yet it still manages to navigate with assurance around some complex music. A recording being produced during the group's current two-night stand at Scullers might help it find a new home.

As a rule, local big bands reflect their leader's idols. Thus drummer Kenny Hadley's unit carries the mark of Buddy Rich, and the Ryles Jazz Orchestra leans strongly toward the Maynard Ferguson model. Big & Phat's boss, Daniel Ian Smith, may be a saxophonist, but his heart is clearly with the complex scores that flugelhornist Thad Jones produced for the big band he co-led with drummer Mel Lewis. It helps immeasurably in this regard that drummer Jim Lattini plays the arrangements with Lewis's sense of small-group flexibility.

The group was at its most impressive on original compositions by local writers. Ted Pease contributed two titles. "Are You Ready?" was an aggressive conjunction of the various sections around a trombone lead in which the horns continued to explode behind the solos of tenor saxophonist Jason Hunter and trumpeter Dave Rezek. In "The Usual Suspects," soulful strains were submerged in another thick ensemble weave. Lighter touches, including a muted-trumpet/soprano sax unison and a brief interlude of murmuring brass, added textures that effectively launched pianist Joe Mulholland and Hunter into their improvisations.

"Nightwings," composed by Dick Lowell as a feature for trombonist Tony Lada, was a multi-sectioned work with warmer colors and a sure sense of drama. Lada was particularly effective, working in and out of the score as the full band built to a crescendo behind him on the "Flight" section. Mulholland and Hunter carried much of the first set's solos, and each displayed a sense of pacing that complemented the progress of the arrangements. Mulholland provided what could be a model for such an approach on "Suspects," confining most of his ideas to the piano's lower register while only the rhythm section worked behind him, then stabbing out higher exclamations as the trumpets entered. Doug Olsen took honors, however, with a flugelhorn statement on "I Waited for You" that balanced a strong attack with rich melodic ideas. Olsen also wrote the set's lone flagwaver, "Good Bread, Bad Jelly." a melody on the reharmonized chord changes to "There'll Never Be Another You."

Guest vocalist Shawnn Monteiro provided exactly what was required - pinpoint intonation, swing, and superior song choices. Her only miscue was in identifying the Sergio Mendes tune "So Many Stars" as an Antonio Carlos Jobim composition.

Big & Phat lacks the velvet touch required for the gentler passages of Thad Jones's "Quietude," which opened the evening; and the arrangement it uses on "Monk's Mood" smoothes out the rough edges and illuminates the shadows that made Thelonious Monk's ballad so haunting. On balance, however, the band sounds astonishingly together, and should come away with an admirable CD for its efforts.

This review was reprinted on the FRONT PAGE of the Arts section on Thursday, January 31, 2002, under the heading Big & Phat Ably Handles Complexity.