

Full marks to UWI Arts Jazz Ensemble

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Even as patrons were massing at top venues for the climax of the Tobago Jazz Festival last month, the **UWI** Arts Student Jazz Ensemble was rallying the few faithful for a special evening at the JFK Lecture Theatre, **UWI** St Augustine, on April 29, for its **More Than Just Jazz** concert.

Ritualistically understated and barely promoted, the annual offering of the Musical Arts Unit of the **UWI** Department of Creative and Festival Arts (DCFA) maintained its equally predictable high creative standard. With a steelpan innovator and music connoisseur at the helm, it is difficult to understand why more, mainly in-house, resources aren't devoted toward better public promotion of campus events such as these.

On show on the evening was an ensemble led by young director, Kh-ion De Las—an accomplished **UWI** North Illinois University graduate, pannist, composer and arranger, now a DCFA music tutor.

With one exception, this year's event focused on indigenous music spanning the genres of calypso and soca and covering a relatively wide period including Lord Kitchener's 12 Bar Joan and MX Prime's Full Extreme.

Opening with a Josef Ward arrangement of 12 Bar Joan, the en-

The **UWI** Arts Student Jazz Ensemble performs at the JFK Lecture Theatre, **UWI** St Augustine, for its **More Than Just Jazz** concert. PHOTO: Vibert Medford



semble did not appear to be willing to depart too far from fairly standard DCFA musical interpretations of well-known pieces with regulars Joshua Ramsay and Isaiah Clement providing competent sax solos together with a more energetic tenor pan section.

De Las' version of Explainer's Lorraine, which followed, was even less exciting. For a song that begins with the line: "Lorraine, you better wake up," a doleful tempo appears unsuitable, though in the world of music, Explainer's tearful farewell to Lorraine is also not to be forgotten. All of this, however, contributed to

an arrangement that made space for Anchortasso Abhijit on the harmonium, Jason Noel on the bass and a Clement solo on the tenor sax.

Many would contend that the show did not entirely come alive until a joint student collaboration on Stevie Wonder's Lately. The lone non-calypso/soca song on the programme is always a winner, with Akil Richardson's interpretation of Stevie's keyboard solo capturing the richness of the pop music classic.

What followed was the ensemble at its best. De Las's interpretation of Jason "GBM Nutron" Carter's Calypso made memorable use of Denzel

Headley and Daechelle Morrison on the marimba and introduced the accomplished John Waterman on the guitar, featuring a delightful conversation between his instrument and Jason Noel's bass. Together with De Las' closing piece, this was a significant highlight of the evening.

Step down the time signature a bit for Machel Montano's Human, which followed. De Las was at his cruising best with support from the ensemble. Then, stand by for Full Extreme at what felt like a factor of 10 per cent temp. The soca purists would not have appreciated it one bit, but the arrangement

brought out the texture of a melody that appeared to have been lost through the frenzied excitement of the original rendition. De Las took a risk with this one and succeeded on the strength of an ensemble that understood what he was doing and a grasp of the essential sweetness of the melody.

Count on a group of young musicians to hear the chordal structure and harmonies under Aaron "Voice" St Louis' Far From Finished. This was highlight number two of the evening, a joint arrangement of the Ensemble of one of their **UWI** colleague's outstanding works as a composer/performer.

Then came the finale with De Las' memorable composition Pentatonic Onion, a piece whose title he left to his students. The first suggestion for the multi-layered composition, that inspired an encore, was "Cabbage." There was also a suggestion that it be called "Onions" and even "Tectonic Platter." But the group settled on Pentatonic Onion to reflect its residence along a pentatonic scale and its multi-layered nature.

The Ensemble Director had said the aim of the concert was "to add creativity to (the) songs using jazz techniques and theory, while maintaining the authenticity."

Mission accomplished. Full marks, **UWI** Arts Jazz Ensemble.