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Veteran jazz pianist opens Asper series with impressive set

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Concert Review

Kenny Barron/Tiro

Izzy Asper Jazz Performances

Barney Theatre

Sept. 24

4 stars out of five

PIANIST Kenny Barron has played with a who's who of the jazz world and played most places except Winnipeg before the weekend.

But his first performance in the city Saturday night was a treat -- he played with skill and verve in a trio and solo -- and a great way to open the Izzy Asper Jazz Performances series. (He played a second concert yesterday afternoon).

Barron is an old pro: He caught his audience's attention right away Saturday night with a swinging version of Duke Pearson's Big Bertha and easily held it through to the climactic All Blues.

Bertha was a good way to introduce the band. Barron is well-known through his decades of recordings but for many people, it was the first chance to see him perform and he came out kicking.

Bassist Steve Kirby has become a fixture on the local jazz scene, and Barron had him working hard right from the get-go.

But it was twentysomething drummer Kim Thompson, a regular in Barron's bands, who was a surprise hit. Her playing was fluid and exciting and she had an empathy with Barron that comes from time on the road and in the studio.

Barron drew cheers from the audience for his energetic performance of Miles Davis's Solar, a tune that forced Kirby and Thompson to dig out their best chops to keep up.

Kirby, director of jazz studies at the University of Manitoba faculty of music and artistic director of the Asper series, and Thompson originally hail from St. Louis, where musicians know a thing or two about the blues. And it was a good thing they did when Barron called his own composition, And Then Again, a joyful blues tune that highlighted Thompson's stellar playing.

If the concert seemed to be heading for its climax in All Blues, whose bass lines let Kirby shine, Barron's solo performance of Spring Can Hang You Up The Most was a close second as hit of the night.

There were a lot of hits though, such as the classic ballad Body and Soul, which featured a beautiful opening solo by Barron before the rhythm section joined in. Or the Barron composition Lullabye, a strong yet subtle piece. Or Star Eyes, or Water Lily, another Barron original. Or Black Orpheus. Barron found the right mix of standards and his own writing.

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