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Asper Series kicks off with lively, upbeat show

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AFTER a long summer hiatus, the 2008-2009 Izzy Asper Jazz Performance Series got underway this weekend with an all-star band led by saxophone player Bobby Watson. With his band Horizon -- Watson (saxophone), Terell Stafford (trumpet), Edward Simon (piano), Essiet Okon Essiet (bass) and Victor Lewis (drums) -- things got off to a swinging start and further enhanced the series' reputation as the place to catch the best international jazz artists performing in the city.

With each member of Horizon leading successful careers in their own right, it was somewhat of a coup to get them back together again to open the series this year. And they did not disappoint. Buoyed by their always-smiling and energetic leader, Horizon led off with the title track from Watson's 1999 CD *Quiet As It's Kept*, a tune that started off mellow with Stafford's crafty muted trumpet, Simon's soft chords and Lewis's shuffling rhythms, then kicked up a notch as Watson's muscular, edgier tone took over as he reeled off a nice blues tinged solo.

Essiet took charge of the next number *Ode For Aaron*, with a tour de force bass solo that had him thumping the bass like a percussion, while playing quick notes with blinding speed. The band was fired up after his intro and each member soloed with extra enthusiasm, in particular Stafford, who showed why he is considered one of the premier jazz trumpeters on the scene. Tilting his head back and away from the microphone, he let out piercing cries on the trumpet, made the instrument growl and with lightning-fast notes set the pace for Watson who barely drew a breath through his superb hard bop solo.

Horizon is co-led by drummer Lewis and his playing was the heartbeat in every song. On *Ginger Bread Boy*, he laid out a funky drum beat that would be right at home on a James Brown CD, and took a solo that was played with the energy of someone half his 58 years.

There were a few mellow moments in the performance, a smooth version of Burt Bacharach's *The Look of Love* and Duke Ellington's *In a Sentimental Mood*, but the overall mood and pace of the show was lively and upbeat.

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