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Great jazz the perfect gift to mark Paley's birthday

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IT was billed as a tribute to the jazz of Kansas City, but the Sunday performance of the Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra was as much about Winnipeg and local jazz stalwart Ron Paley.

The highlight of the afternoon concert, one of two on Sunday, was the big band performing Home, a piece about Winnipeg commissioned from pianist Paley and a complex, almost symphonic composition that taxed the talents of the musicians while eliciting great performances.

The piece opened with Paley performing solo as the other 17 musicians sat motionless, almost reverential, enraptured by the music before jumping in for a sometimes wild ride through Paley's interpretations of his hometown. The ensemble play and solos were superb, but alto saxophonist Greg Gatien and trumpeter Darren Ritchie stood out in a fine example of how gorgeous a big band can be in full swing.

The concert was also marking Paley's 60th birthday, which falls later this month.

The Kansas City Suite, the 10-piece suite written for the Count Basie Orchestra in 1960 by saxophone great Benny Carter, is seldom performed in its entirety so it was a treat to hear the music played by a very good big band, music that celebrates the history of a city that holds a key place in jazz.

Hearing the suite is like walking the streets of Kansas City in the 1930s and '40s when it was a wide-open town with nightclubs open 24 hours a day and a haven for so many great musicians such as tenor saxophonists Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young.

The WJO was directed by Jim Mair, a former Winnipegger who teaches music at a Kansas City college and is artistic director of the Kansas City Jazz Orchestra -- a man who knows something about KC jazz. Mair, a tenor saxophonist, also played some good solos, especially on There'll Never Be Another You, which he dedicated to Paley and in which he added a few phrases of Happy Birthday.

It was a tale of two jazz cities on the weekend.

Not too far away at the Berney Theatre, the music of New Orleans was being celebrated as Wycliffe Gordon and Peter Martin took jazz fans for a walk along Basin and Bourbon streets (and in Gordon's case, his natty suit suggested a stop at the clothiers along Canal Street).

Trombonist Gordon and pianist Martin fronted a band

with trumpeter Jumanne Smith and Winnipeggers Steve Kirby on bass and Quincy Davis on drums in three concerts Saturday and Sunday as part of the Izzy Asper Jazz Performances series.

Gordon's growling, slurring trombone, Martin's rollicking piano and Smith's high notes conjured the rich musical life of the city that lays claim to being the birthplace of jazz.

The repertoire Saturday night included ballads like Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans, Honeysuckle Rose, After You've Gone, Basin Street Blues and Down on Bourbon Street, all performed with the sass and verve that permeates music from the Crescent City.

On Doctor Jazz, a Jellyroll Morton tune, Martin tore up the keyboard while Gordon slurred around a plunger mute and Smith blew his way through the high register, bringing to mind New Orleans' famous son Louis Armstrong.

It's hard to ignore the R&B/funk aspect of N'Awlins, and what better way to showcase it than with The Meters' trademark tune, Hey Pocky Way.

Gordon and Smith shared vocal and Smith made his trumpet jump as Martin improved over the familiar chords of the popular song.

Bassist Kirby and drummer Davis maintained such a tight second-line groove behind them you almost had to pry them out of it.

Gordon scatted on several songs, but saved his best for Heebie Jeebies, the song on which Louis Armstrong is said to have invented scat singing when his lyrics fell on the floor in a recording studio.

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Concert review

Winnipeg Jazz Orchestra

Kansas City Suite

Winnipeg Art Gallery

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4 stars out of 5

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