

A fine study in jazzmanship

By Philip Elwood

With his usual aplomb, baritone saxophonist-composer-band leader and iconoclast Gerry Mulligan this week is converting a quickly organized engagement at El Matador into a forceful, swinging, mainstream jazz event.

Among Mulligan's many talents has always been his sense of the contemporary — his refusal to be revered for past accomplishments and his persistence in playing (and writing) for a young, big-eared audience.

Well versed in the folklore of American popular music and the theater, and in the right of an artist to command his own performance (in spite of well-meaning but insufferable ringside kibitzers) Mulligan at El Matador is a marvelous study in jazzmanship.

His material, like his style, is eclectic. "Line for Lyons" (Jimmy, of d.j. and Monterey Jazz fame) was followed by "Polka Dots and Moonbeams." The first a neat set of 1950s cool-jazz riffs, the second a mellow, sensuous reading of typical Tin Pan Alley trash.

"All they wrote about was pug noses and freckles," noted Mulligan — then he and his accompanying trio blew both noses and freckles to the wind.

A light, breezy, Latin theme, "For An Unfinished Woman" softened the club feeling, and "K-4 Pacific" (a long work named for a railroad locomotive chugging into Chicago) brought the set to a huffing and puffing conclusion.

Mulligan has always had fun with tune titles — recall, for instance, "Nights at the Turntable," and "Bike Up the Strand." The latter, variations on the inverted chords of "Strike Up the Band."



GERRY MULLIGAN

A deft iconoclast

A broad and flexible personality, often temperamental, projects through the artist's horn. Mulligan plays as

he feels, as he behaves. He can be caustic, sentimental, hot, cool, humorous — but always honest.

His baritone sax seems as light and fluid as a flute, although last night he said, "My reed's giving me trouble, the horn isn't doing what I want it to." Couldn't prove it by me. As usual I marveled at Mulligan's control, his tonal colorings and what must be the most remarkable sense of saxophone rhythmic inflections that the modern jazz generation has produced.

Pianist Larry Vuckovich, bassist Bob Maize and drummer Benny Barth romped along splendidly behind Mulligan, who is not above shouting commands to his colleagues and publicly advising them how to handle certain material.

"I throw a lot of tough stuff at them," Mulligan acknowledged, "and they toss it right back." Certainly Vuckovich, especially, has never shone brighter. To play piano with a man (like Mulligan) who has often eliminated the instrument from his groups and yet who plays it imaginatively himself on occasion, is quite a challenge. Vuckovich plays with distinction under fire.

Barth and Maize are comparably impressive, adding immensely to the integrity of Mulligan's presentation.