

Basie's back and swingin' strong as ever

By Philip Elwood

The Count, Bill Basie, resumed leadership of his band last night at the Great American Music Hall after a four month layoff because of a September heart attack.

The Hall was jammed, the mood festive and The Count was swingin' the blues just like old times.

Forty years ago this week Basie roared into Manhattan from Kansas City (by way of Chicago) and recorded the first of his four dozen Decca label renditions—things like "Roseland Shuffle," "John's Idea," "Good Morning Blues," and "One O'Clock Jump." A legend was born, classics filled the 78 rpm grooves.

Last night Basie looked fine, a bit uncertain in comments but playing strong, inimitable piano and jabbing his 17 piece crew into spirited performance.

The material was a bit shop-worn—much the same as we heard at the Masonic on the Pablo Records concert and close to the Monterey Jazz Festival presentation, held while Basie was hospitalized in September and including Nat Pierce at the piano.

The longer I live, and the farther we all drift from the glory days of big bands, the more I am impressed by the ensemble cohesion and instrumental voicing that bands like Basie's take for granted.

(Basie's, now that I think of it, is the only one left that's working his side of the road.)

When The Count came onto the bandstand the crowd gave him a standing ovation. "Wow, I'm moved," said Basie, continuing, "and I'm glad to be back here again . . . I been out there in the woods, y'know."

Then the band romped with saxist Jimmy Forrest doing his "Body and Soul" bit, Al Grey tomboning through "The More I See You," saxist Bobby Platter, on alto, soloing on "Black Velvet" (and nicely, indeed) and

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Count Basie came back swingin' the blues after his heart attack

drummer Butch Miles driving the band with great power and imagination.

Basie's trombones have always been outstanding—in solo and ensemble. This band is no exception. His trumpet section, with remarkably few solos, is tight and disciplined. Guitarist Freddie Green is still part of everything, of course, as is baritone sax Charlie Fowlkes.

Singer Joe Williams opened the show with a brief set, featuring pianist Larry Vukovich, drummer Benny Barth and bassist Dean R Eilly. "When Sonny Gets Blue" was particularly mellow, down in Williams' bass-baritone range; Vuckvavich sparkled all the way.

After the band's hour, Williams returned to take the show out, singing three numbers with the band (including "Every Day" and "Roll 'Em Pete") and stirring up some emotional charge.

Both of tonight's shows are sold out, and there's no tomorrow for Basie at the Great American Music Hall—at least for this time around.