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One Eternal Hipster Plays a Timeless Space

The actor Jeff Goldblum, when off the screen, personifies the type of smart guy you might describe as “the Eternal Hipster.” Never at a loss for words, never losing his cool, he wears a sly smile.

STEPHEN HOLDEN

MUSIC REVIEW

At Café Carlyle on Tuesday evening, where he opened the fall season with his jazz group, facetiously named the Mildred Snitzer Orchestra, Mr. Goldblum was his own voluble warm-up act as well as the main attraction. “This is not a usual audience,” he observed midway through the evening during a question-and-answer segment. “I’m not in Kansas anymore.”

Mr. Goldblum is the pianist in the group, which includes John Storie on guitar, Tim Emmons on bass, Zane Musa on tenor saxophone and Kenny Elliott on drums. The band plays regularly in Los Angeles at the Rockwell

Table and Stage, but Tuesday’s show was its first New York appearance.

The Snitzer ensemble has no pretensions to technical brilliance. Its members are musically like-minded buddies who enjoy making jazz together. Mr. Goldblum’s pianism is extremely percussive while lacking in polish. The group’s musical star isn’t Mr. Goldblum but its resident wild man, Mr. Musa, who in his most frenzied sax solos suggests a maniacal John Turturro character. As the group honked and banged its way through Charlie Parker’s “Scrapple From the Apple,” I was reminded of how much of the edgier bebop of the ’40s and ’50s was playful conversation among musicians talking and joking with one another through music. On one level, of course it’s serious, but on another it’s raucous cutup comedy.

The ultraromantic ballad “Stella by Starlight” was stripped of



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its dreaminess and became a platform for Mr. Goldblum’s zany deconstruction of the lyrics. The band left it for a talented vocal guest, Hilary Gardner, whom Mr.

Goldblum had recently met, to sing the serious stuff, most notably an atmospheric “Autumn in New York.”

But despite some pleasurable

music, the heart of the show was Mr. Goldblum’s interaction with the audience in a kind of running quiz show to identify quotations from movies and literature and

The Mildred Snitzer Orchestra
From left, John Storie, Jeff Goldblum and Tim Emmons performing at Café Carlyle.

highlight his erudition. The entertainer he most resembled was David Letterman, with elements of Paul Shaffer thrown in.

As he bantered with the audience during the warm-up, playing the charming life of the party, Mr. Goldblum brought to mind Café Carlyle’s ultimate host, Bobby Short, who had the gift of making every performance there feel like an exclusive social event. But with Mr. Goldblum playing host, the imaginary living room was not a penthouse on the Upper East Side of Manhattan but a late-night Los Angeles hangout for the very hip.

In opening the fall season with Mr. Goldblum, Café Carlyle has signaled what seems to be a daring change in direction. Later, the rock cutup Buster Poindexter, a.k.a. David Johansen, will appear.

For the moment, at least, the staid, elegant club seems determined to keep the joint jumping.