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## Reviving Sounds and Legends

By WILL FRIEDWALD

### *J.D. Allen Quartet*

Village Vanguard

178 Seventh Avenue South, (212) 255-4037

Through Sunday

This energetic young tenor saxophonist-composer is doing for free jazz what the Marsalis brothers did for hard bop 20 years ago. That is, he's helping us fall in love with a venerable form all over again.

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Frank Stewart

Saxophonist J.D. Allen brings his distinctive free-jazz style to the Village Vanguard.

Mr. Allen's music takes us back to the birth of the avant-garde (think Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry), a driving, melodic sound that differs from the best bebop primarily in theory; the mere fact that you have to listen hard to decide whether or not they're playing off conventional chord changes tells you all you need to know. The addition of trumpeter Jeremy Pelt (who recalls Freddie Hubbard in his sessions with Eric Dolphy) to bassist Gregg August and drummer Rodney Green makes the group's music even more accessible.

I thought about the Marsalises (who were recently named collectively as Jazz Masters, in a surprising move by the NEA) during Mr. Allen's Tuesday-night show when he opened with a leaf from Wynton's book: He marched around the club and then onto the stage already playing his opening number, "The North Star"—or rather an intro to it that sounded like the main theme of Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture." This piece of uptown showmanship in the venerable Vanguard set the tone for the set. As noted, Mr. Allen improvises primarily off the melodic line, like the post-Ornette "free" players, rather than the harmonic progressions, like the beboppers. But this shouldn't lead you to expect a set of ear-splitting screeching; every note that Messrs. Allen and Pelt play is in tune, and every rhythm not only perfectly metrical but swinging.

Mr. Allen also followed an example set by Miles Davis (not to mention that overlooked avant-gardist, Louis Prima) in that the whole set went by without an interruption of any kind. Sometimes he transitioned subtly from one tune to another by means of an arco bass solo from Mr. August; at other points he simply stopped playing one composition and started playing the next one without so much as a fermata between them.

Most of the numbers he called on in the opening set on Tuesday came from his two recent trio albums, "I Am, I Am" (2008) and "Shine" (2009); At the Vanguard, the addition of Mr. Pelt gave Mr. Allen's music a boost that made the live show more exciting than the CDs. When they played together, it

signaled that we were at the heads of the various tunes—a way of helping the crowd find its way in the music—and their interplay was consistently brilliant. (The two also serve as the front line on Mr. Pelt's album "November," but that also doesn't capture their open-ended, piano-less interplay from the Vanguard quartet.)

Like a lot of the music in the Coleman-Coltrane era, there weren't any traditional ballads (except for a surprising and welcome detour through "Everything Happens to Me"); in keeping with that era, Mr. Allen favored dirges and spirituals over love songs. Mr. Allen's "Son House," a dedication to the great Mississippi blues giant, was framed by his more explicitly spiritual "The Cross & the Crescent Sickle." He does play something like the blues, though not the rigidly-defined 12-bar, 1-4-5 chord pattern kind. But even when he essayed "Everything Happens to Me" and "When You're Smiling," he concentrated on playing with the tune rather than running the cycle of chords, as the boppers do.

Mr. Allen is the friendliest of free-jazzers. His quartet is a marvelous reminder that there's more to jazz than the well-mined blues and "I Got Rhythm" changes.