Jazz youth elbow out musical elders

By James T. Jones IV
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Trumpeter Wynton Marsalis' international acclaim has loosed a tidal wave of young talents on the jazz world.

Concert headliners like trumpeter Roy Hargrove, 26; organist Joey DeFrancesco, 18; pianist Harry Connick, Jr., 22; saxophonist Christopher Hollyday, 20; and trumpeter Marlon Jordan, 19, have their own bands with equally young sidemen.

And, at a time when masters like bassist Ron Carter, 53, and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, 72, lack record contracts, these upstarts are on major labels.

That's angering some older musicians. The media are "distorting jazz history by saying these young people are very important to the growth of jazz," Carter says.

"They're ignoring ... people who have put the time in. No one is benefiting from them except booking agents and record labels."

Indeed, RCA's Novus has netted Billboard jazz chart hits with pianist Marcus Roberts, Hollyday and Hargrove. PolyGram recently topped the jazz chart with the young Harper Brothers' Live at the Village Vanguard. Marsalis, almost an elder at 28, has sold more than a million albums for Columbia. That label also reaped a pop crossover hit in Connick's soundtrack to Where Harry Met Sally....

But the new crop's success has pushed aside a group of musicians that premier jazz fest promoter George Wein calls the "lost generation."

"You either have to be 22-and-under or 75-and-over to receive any acclaim for your artistry," says pianist James Williams, 39. "Musicians in between are being overlooked as being not marketable by the major record companies, by promoters and club owners."

"I don't have my own record contract in the States," Carter says. "Something is wrong with that. I think I'm more equipped to carry on tradition than they are."

Even Marsalis, the catalyst for the youth movement, admits many of the young turks may not be ready; they may be seeking commercial acclaim before substance. "(I'd) like to see them recording with other people. ... Ron Carter told me you're not ready at 20 to be out here on the road with a band."

Hollyday doesn't agree with his older colleagues. "I don't think there's a limitation on how young you can be to perform this music. It's not necessarily age, but knowledge. I went to clubs at an early age. I was forced to mature."

Besides, "it's impossible to make a living if you're not going to record," says guitarist Mark Whitfield, 23. "Let's give some young cats a chance."

But the problem isn't only recordings. Older musicians are being passed over by top jazz clubs such as Kimball's in San Francisco and Blues Alley in Washington, D.C., for young acts with more name recognition.

"The record companies are behind the young people," explains Blues Alley's Ralph Camilli. "They see their appearance here as helping record sales. They pay for additional advertising and buy tickets."

The youngsters' club dates may be successful, but Wein feels they're not drawing audiences in the concert setting, a thriving venue for older musicians. "They're not appearing to be having enough fun on stage."

Carter feels younger players need to be sidemen first, with older musicians who can teach them. "Miles started with Bird (Charlie Parker), and Clifford (Brown) with Max (Roach). Who have these guys played with besides their own bands?"

What have they learned?

Jordan is content with his own band (average age: 22). "I wanted people to mature with me as I mature."

But Geoff Keezer, 19, thinks the older players have a point. Though he has released a solo album, Curvéball (Sunny Side), he wants to continue playing piano for drummer Art Blakey.

Yet he empathizes with his contemporaries. "You can't learn how to play in your own band, but there are not too many opportunities for horn players as sidemen. Nowadays, you have to create your own situation."