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WYNTON MARSALIS

The Magic Hour

(Blue Note)

Make that *The Magic Half-Hour*. Wynton Marsalis' debut release for Blue Note offers a handful of genuinely affecting tracks offset by an equal number of duds. And most of the trouble stems from the trumpeter's otherwise admirable interest in the past.

When Marsalis first burst on the scene, during the early 1980s, he primarily looked to '60s-era Miles Davis for inspiration. Since becoming artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, however, he has delved further and further into the roots of the music.

Unfortunately, as *The Magic Hour* demonstrates, Marsalis' musical way-back machine doesn't always offer a smooth ride. On tunes like "Feeling of Jazz" and "You and Me," he clearly aims to capture the sound of an earlier era. His solos are essays on early jazz-trumpet technique. And his ability to conjure up the brilliant sound of Louis Armstrong or the animal growl of Bubber Miley is remarkable.

For all Marsalis' erudition and facility, however, the net effect is pedantic and contrived — an impressive lecture on jazz history, but a lecture, nonetheless.

Only when Marsalis loosens up sufficiently to sound like himself does the music catch fire. On tracks like "Big Fat Hen," "Skipping," and "Free to Be," the trumpeter embraces the full range of his resources, from primordial swing to post-bop abstraction. Here, Armstrong and Davis, New Orleans grooves, and cerebral solo lines happily commingle as part of a fully integrated sound.

At moments like this, Marsalis seems to be speaking to us in his own voice. Would that he did so more often.

—Alexander Gelfand

THE MOUTIN REUNION QUARTET

Red Moon

(Sunnyside)

This post-bop-mainstream group hasn't yet garnered the American audience it merits, despite rave reviews during the past few years in Boston, Washington, L.A., and New York.

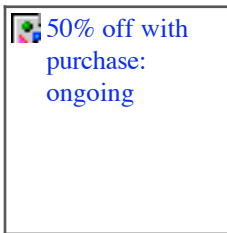
François and Louis Moutin are identical twins who play upright bass and drums, respectively, and they are in superb form here. The band is their second group together, hence the "reunion" tag. Louis' drumming is a constant stream of invention, only obtrusive when it's supposed to be. François's precisely articulated sound — which often includes double-stops on those fat bass strings — has been described as "horn-like."

The fraternal ESP shared by the twins extends to pianist Baptiste Trotignon and saxophonist Rick Margitza, who has a sound like Michael Brecker and edgy lyricism.

Each of the bookends for this set overhauls a standard in a striking way. It starts with an encrypted, arresting arrangement — for drums and bass only — of "Beyond the Sea." At the close, find a rich restatement of Chick Webb's old "Stompin' at the Savoy," packed with beautiful insinuations. In between are eight Moutin originals, including the title track, which showcases slanting chords and an urgent, declamatory theme.

—Steve Nash

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