

THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

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Jazz trio pays spirited tribute to music of genre's founders

Butch Thompson Trio

Where: Warren Performing Arts Ctr.

When: Saturday night

By Jay Harvey

STAFF WRITER

The great heritage of early jazz piano lies confidently under the fingers of Butch Thompson, who led his trio in an elegantly lively concert Saturday night at the Warren Performing Arts Center.

Known to a nationwide radio audience for many years as the house band on *A Prairie Home Companion*, the Butch Thompson Trio can be counted on to explore the jazz that grew most directly out of ragtime in a respectful but never dully reverent manner. The Trio presented a refreshing survey of highlights from such masters as Willie "the Lion" Smith, Fats Waller and James P. Johnson.

In Saturday night's concert, the presiding genius inspiring Thompson's keyboard was Jelly Roll Morton, whose picturesque, influential pieces proved that composed jazz did not have to be a contradiction in terms. There were just two Morton numbers on each half, but their insouciant feeling and spicy textures overlaid on fresh, stimulating structures — a Morton signature — seemed to bring out Thompson's best and most characteristic work.

His droll comments between numbers signaled a wit that was never far from the surface of his playing. But there was occasionally lyrical depth as well, for Thompson commands a nuanced tone that many more brutal ivory-ticklers might well envy.

Indianapolis bluesman Leroy Carr's *How Long Blues* is unlikely to have received a more gently moving rendition than the one Thompson played unaccompanied here.

Joined by his bandmates, the pianist also went far in bringing out the wistful nature of Johnson's gently swinging *If I Could Be With You One Hour Tonight*. And he was capable of applying the same sort of warmth to more complicated music. Smith's *Echo of Spring*, a reverie with a left-hand accompaniment that nicely blurs its stride-piano origins, had every curlicue intact and showed mastery in blending cross rhythms to create a unified effect.

The trio rose to a welcome level of bumptious energy in such pieces as Eubie Blake's *Chevy Chase* and Morton's *King Porter Stomp*. Its tribute to Morton's adaptation of *Tiger Rag* joined each contrasting strain smoothly to its neighbor. Even the tiger's roar — Thompson's left forearm — sounded seamlessly connected to the rolling energy of the whole piece.

[The drummer's] diverse repertoire of New Orleans parade-ground figures and shuffle rhythms rolled out with a nicely restrained energy, whether he was taking an outspoken solo in Earl Hines' *Rosetta* or lending accents with deft brushes to Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*.

Marty Eggers made the labor-intensive slap-bass technique look and sound playful on most numbers, but adopted a gentler plucked-style on the subtler pieces. His solos were animated and cogent, which might be said of everything the trio played.