

Spike Wilner

As the proprietor of two globally famous Greenwich Village jazz clubs, pianist Michael “Spike” Wilner, 55, has booked most of New York’s finest practitioners of the 88s since he purchased Smalls in 2007 and opened Mezzrow in 2014, while continuing to refine his own, distinctive tonal personality on the instrument, as documented most recently on *Aliens And Wizards* (Cellar Live), with bassist Tyler Mitchell and drummer Anthony Pinciotti. This is his first Blindfold Test.

George Cables

“Too Close For Comfort” (*Too Close For Comfort*, High Note, 2021) Cables, piano; Essiet Okun Essiet, bass; Victor Lewis, drums.

The trio plays the shit out of that amazing, dense arrangement, then sounds great on the blowing — very modern vocabulary, lyrical taste and beauty and driving swing. Jeb Patton’s trio? I’m wondering who else I know who plays like that. Obviously a contemporary player — younger than me, in other words. He’s not? [afterwards] Three masters. 5 stars.

Aaron Diehl

“Milano” (*The Vagabond*, Mack Avenue, 2020) Diehl, piano; Paul Sikivie, bass; Gregory Hutchinson, drums.

That’s Aaron Diehl. I’m not familiar with this piece — whether it’s an original or something he adapted for the trio. From the first few notes, before I realized it was Aaron, I heard the gorgeous piano sound. The touch is beautiful, like a classical pianist almost. I noticed it had a very Chopinesque vibe, then it went into this groovy Erroll Garner-esque feeling, but with so much beautiful modern harmony. The trio is well-disciplined. A remarkable piece of music. 5 stars.

Geoffrey Keezer

“Brilliant Corners” (*On My Way To You*, MarKeez, 2018) Keezer, piano, Fender Rhodes; Mike Pope, bass; Lee Pearson, drums.

My immediate first thought was Robert Glasper. The change of textures surprised me — they started the Monk tune as a traditional trio and then transitioned to an electric feel, and really went for it. A visceral performance. Fantastic, high-level playing by everyone. Gerald Clayton? Sometimes I have conservative objections to taking something from Monk ... but in this case, it was so well-done and so cool. I think it’s a masterpiece. It blew my mind. 5 stars. [afterwards] Geoff lives in this rarefied stratosphere of musical talent — monster facility on the piano, monster ideas and vociferous energy. Aggression, but with beauty; nothing ugly there.

Matthew Shipp

“Prelude To A Kiss” (*To Duke*, RogueArt, 2015) Shipp, piano.

“Prelude To A Kiss” on acid or something, where you’re in a familiar room and all of a sudden everything starts melting away. It’s a Dada approach to this music, but such a lovely, creative sense of harmony on the piano, and obviously a great piano player. 5 stars.

Renee Rosnes

“Swoop” (*Kinds Of Love*, Smoke Sessions, 2021) Rosnes, piano; Chris Potter, tenor saxophone; Christian McBride, bass; Carl Allen, drums.

Everyone falls into the category of top professional New York player, to my ears. I’m sure I know them all. The tune is super-cool, kind of a Tristano vibe with the tenor and piano playing that great line together, and strong hits. The pianist is a very strong improviser, playing great lines in the upper register, with a beautiful touch and a facility to execute



“10,000 stars,” Spike Wilner said of Ahmad Jamal.

with clarity, which is a jazz pianist’s calling card — and you don’t hear it that often. The tenor player is killing. 5 stars.

Robert Glasper

“Portrait Of An Angel” (*Canvas*, Blue Note, 2005) Glasper, piano; Vicente Archer, bass; Damian Reid, drums.

A professional trio by any standard — very good musicians. That’s a beautiful piece of music. I love the transition to solo piano interlude. The solos are motific and lyric, a modern sound, with good feeling, and great solos from the bass and drums. 5 stars. [afterwards] That track proves to anyone who had any doubts what a great piano player and what a sophisticated jazz musician Robert is.

Gerald Clayton

“My Ideal, Take 1” (*Bells On Sand*, Blue Note, 2022) Clayton, piano.

“My Ideal.” I thought about Brad Mehldau, Fred Hersch — people who play a lot of counterpoint in their improvisation. I liked that it wasn’t derivative when they finally got into their thing, during the second chorus. Beautiful touch. The time feel was strong, but still open, and the lines were beautiful. Very creative. The sound quality on this recording was remarkable. 5 stars.

Ahmad Jamal

“The Awakening” (*The Awakening*, Impulse!, 1970) Jamal, piano; Jamil Nasser, bass; Frank Gant, drums.

“The Awakening,” Ahmad Jamal Trio with Jamil Nasser and Frank Gant. That record is in the top five greatest jazz albums ever recorded, in my opinion. This track typifies everything we want from music: the dynamic changes, the incredible swing feeling and textures, the great beauty and subtlety of his harmonies. Every pianist should digest this record and make it part of their musical fiber. Everything else you played for me today, it’s like the nursery school kids, and now the teacher has arrived. 10,000 stars.

Kirk Lightsey/Rufus Reid

“Oleo” (*The Nights Of Bradley’s*, Sunnyside, 1985–2004) Lightsey, piano; Reid, bass.

“Oleo.” Someone who loves Phineas Newborn, who knows how to play an uptempo “Rhythm” changes, and throw down on it. Frenetic energy. My immediate impression is it’s someone from a generation older than mine, but I’m at a loss as to who — so many people could play in that way. These guys obviously play a lot of duo; they took care of business in terms of time and fire. 5 stars.

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The “Blindfold Test” is a listening test that challenges the featured artist to discuss and identify the music and musicians who performed on selected recordings. The artist is then asked to rate each tune using a 5-star system. No information is given to the artist prior to the test.