

Mike Jones *Magicians' Musician*

The Green Mill in Chicago is one of the world's greatest jazz clubs, but there aren't many world-class trios that *only* play the Mill. Outside of performing 250 nights a year with the Penn and Teller magic show in Las Vegas, that's the case with pianist Mike Jones. His new live album, *Chicago Trio 2010*, captures all the flavor of on- and off-stage banter at the club during an engagement there last year with bassist Larry Kohut and drummer Eric Montzka.

During a brisk, immaculate "Perdido," one of Jones' bandmates on the CD chuckles, "Stop that!" as the pianist dunks another cheeky quote from Fats Waller or Glenn Miller into the speeding narrative. An audience member comments, "You guys are good!" during a particularly flamboyant rendition of "But Not For Me," with idiomatic passages recalling Art Tatum or Teddy Wilson.

In reality, the trio only gets the opportunity to meet at the storied venue two nights a year because of Jones' dream gig in Vegas. "I get health insurance, a pension plan and a freshly tuned seven-foot grand every night after emerging from the Green Room," said Jones of his steady job at the Rio Hotel with Penn and Teller. But things weren't quite as cushy before Penn Jillette—who was tipped off that this amazing piano man was accompanying the diners at the Eiffel Tower restaurant in the Paris Hotel in Vegas—offered him a bigger gig.

After wearying of the commute from Boston (where he studied at Berklee College of Music) to do session work in New York, Jones had been enticed to Vegas a decade ago by the promise of a lucrative showroom engagement that didn't pan out. "One of the first marks of our friendship," recalled Jillette on the phone from Vegas, "was when he tattooed his head and hands, which basically lost him his restaurant gig and committed him to us."

Jillette had decided, at age 45, to learn standup bass, and he credits Jones with showing him the jazz ropes during their nightly pre-show duo gigs at the Rio. "I had told Mike it'd be just like Oscar Peterson playing with Ray Brown, if Ray Brown wasn't that good," quipped Jillette. Certainly Jones is steeped in the stylings of Peterson and "three-handed swing" master Dave McKenna, though he prefers to develop his bass lines organically rather than deploy what he identifies as the memorized patterns that worked so well for Peterson. He was transfixed when he first saw McKenna perform at the Copley Plaza Hotel in Boston in 1981. "He was playing everything a walking bass player would play, plus comping and soloing at the same time," recalled Jones, who thenceforth holed up in a Berklee practice room for six hours a day trying to figure out what McKenna was doing.

Another hero was Jamaican pianist Monty Alexander, who ultimately inducted Jones into the executive piano club when the two met as part of a junket on the QE2 cruise ship. "Monty pulled me aside and told me,



MICHAEL JACKSON

"You've got to stop this self-deprecating stuff. You're one of us, there's only a few of us around."

Playing six nights a week from 5 p.m. until 1 a.m. at the Bostonian Hotel for three years before going to Vegas honed Jones' chops. "I would sometimes play for two-and-a-half hours straight doing the kind of medleys McKenna would do, where a song like 'I Never Knew' leads into 'I Wish I Knew,' then 'I Wished On The Moon' leads to 'Moon Song' to 'No Moon At All.'"

Such punning/thematic segues were evident this spring at the Mill when Jones—joined by Montzka and pithy Chicago bassist Kelly Sill—reprise the Hoagy Carmichael medley he recorded on *Stretches Out* (Chiaroscuro, 2001), including "One Morning In May/The Nearness Of You/Lazy River." He also ripped through another favorite, "Black Orpheus," glancing Tad Dameron's "Hothouse" amidst percussive block chord architecture and greyhound chromatic chases in either hand.

The pianist's new recording is available for free download at his website (jonesjazz.com), so that he can maximize listenership. "[Green Mill owner] Dave Jemilo keeps saying, 'If you ever get famous, y'know, maybe you'll still come back here?' and I say, 'Absolutely!' I keep waiting. If I don't make it by the time I am 50, I think I may have to push it up to 75."

—Michael Jackson