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Max Weinberg plays big-band jazz at Red Bank show

BY JAY LUSTIG, THE STAR LEDGER



Max Weinberg has taken on an ambitious project, playing big-band jazz with his Max Weinberg Big Band.

Photo by ADENA STEVENS for THE STAR-LEDGER

For the last decade, Max Weinberg has juggled two high-profile drumming gigs, keeping the beat for both Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band and Conan O'Brien's talk-show house band. But with the Boss taking the year off (voluntarily) and O'Brien off the air (not so voluntarily), he has found himself with some free time, and has put together a dream project: a swinging big band.

Friday night at the Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank, he paid tribute to heroes of his like drummer Buddy Rich ("the Frank Sinatra and the Picasso of drums," he said) and Count Basie himself, while also touching, briefly, on the E Street repertoire. Springsteen didn't show up, but E Street organist Charles Giordano did, to play on a big-band arrangement of Springsteen's jazziest song: "Kitty's Back," the show's first encore. In general, though, it's hard to think of another E Street side project that has represented such a huge departure from the band's sound. The Max Weinberg Big Band — "Max Weinberg's big, very expensive band," the leader joked — is a 15-piece group with five saxophonists, four trumpeters, three trombonists, a pianist and a stand-up bassist, and no vocalist.

They drew, largely, from the Basie, Rich and Sinatra songbooks, with the horn players — wearing matching suits and positioned behind matching music stands decorated with the Max Weinberg Big Band logo — taking virtuosic solos. Weinberg was, as usual, a powerful, driving force, and spoke earnestly about the music between numbers. He confessed that it was "unnerving," for instance, to attempt Rich's parts on "Parthenia."

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Weinberg and some of his big band members, at the Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank, Friday night ,

Photo by ADENA STEVENS for THE STAR-LEDGER

For an E Street fanatic, this tour represents a great opportunity to hear one of the band's core members do his own thing, and do it so well. But casual Springsteen followers who don't happen to have an interest in big-band music might not be particularly enthusiastic.

Weinberg and some of his big band members, at the Count Basie Theatre in Red Bank, Friday night. Weinberg did, though, reach out to rock fans with a medley of Beatles songs, arranged by Chico Hamilton for Count Basie's band. It started with "Help!", then segued to "Do You Want To Know a Secret" and "Kansas City," the R&B hit that the Beatles covered.

For the second and final encore of the show — which was a benefit for the Joan Dancy and PALS (People With ALS) Foundation, and the Count Basie Theatre Foundation — Weinberg shook things up even more with a song he said he always wanted to play but never did: "I Want Candy," the bouncy 1965 Strangeloves hit that later was covered by new-wave pop group Bow Wow Wow.

The keyboardist and bassist came out from behind their instruments to pound bass drums, helping Weinberg keep the song's primal, Bo Diddley beat. Most of the hornmen played snare drums mounted on their stands, and the trumpeters sang (it was more of a rough-edged chant, really).

After a while, the saxophonists and trombonists (playing their primary instruments instead of the drums) and the singing trumpeters paraded through the theater's aisles, adding a fun, almost giddy cap to an otherwise sober night of music.

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