

# Saxophonists celebrate Dexter Gordon and Jackie McLean

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## Howard Reich

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**D**exter Gordon and Jackie McLean stand as outsized figures in the history of jazz, high-powered saxophonists steeped in the language of bebop and, in McLean's case, its offshoots.

No one is going to match the thunder of Gordon's tenor saxophone nor the sharp-edged tone of McLean's alto, but Chicago tenor saxophonist Juli Wood and New York altoist Caroline Davis weren't trying to Thursday night at the Jazz Showcase. Each has a sound and style of her own, and each drew upon signature approaches in a celebration of Gordon's and McLean's work.

The tribute was focused not so much on the way each man played his horn but, rather, on the music Gordon and McLean wrote. The result was an opening night of considerable musical substance and purpose.

Some of the best music-making emerged when Wood and Davis played in tandem, the two musicians producing an immensely effective partnership in up-tempo and medium swing passages alike. Why did they sound so compelling together? Perhaps because they hardly could have sounded more dissimilar apart.

Wood, after all, owns a big and burly tone on tenor, her husky sound, deep rhythmic accents and prolific phrase-making consistently commanding attention. Davis proved a much cooler player, her smaller and more rounded sound, gentler articulations and simpler lines subtle to the core. Playing side by side, Wood and Davis were fire and ice, their composite sound still more attractive than either one alone.

This was apparent from their opening notes, in Gordon's "Fried Bananas," Wood's beefy, bluesy tenor lines enhanced by Davis' dusky, insinuating counterpart on alto. Add to this Dennis Luxion's sleek pianism, Dennis Carroll's sonorous bass tone and Greg Artry's hard-driving, dramatically charged drum work, and you had the sonic template for the rest of the set.

The ambition of this venture became clear early on, Wood and Davis pairing McLean's "Melody for Melonae" with his "Little Melonae." The first unfolded as a carefully scripted performance, Davis, Wood and Luxion finessing the twists and turns of the tune in unison. The second gave rise to an aggressive, harmonically edgy solo from Wood and a characteristically airy and lithe soliloquy from Davis. In a way, this was the centerpiece of the set, an expansive statement from two saxophonists putting McLean's music through its paces.

Gordon and McLean recorded together, and Wood and Davis referenced their album "The Meeting" by drawing upon

one of its tunes, "On the Trail." Classical music devotees will know that neither Gordon nor McLean penned the piece, which originated in Ferde Grofe's "Grand Canyon Suite." Once again, the evening's saxophonists made it their own, Wood's rambunctious solo answered by Davis' austere beautiful lines.

Still, there's plenty of room for the saxophonists to grow into this music, which in some instances could have benefited from more parity between them and more verve from Davis. Drummer Artry seemed to be making the point through most of the set, ramping up the energy level with sharp attacks and urgent turns of phrase.

Even so, Wood, Davis and friends are off to a strong start, suggesting that they have a great deal yet to discover in this music.

**When:** 8 and 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 4, 8 and 10 p.m. Sunday

**Where:** Jazz Showcase, 806 S. Plymouth Court

**Admission:** \$20-\$35; 312-360-0234 or jazzshowcase.com

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