REVIEW: Time Out is Timeless As The Jacobs Classic Comes Alive Inside San Diego's Magnificent Jacobs Music Center

On Saturday night, the San Diego Symphony's Jacobs Music Center delivered a virtuoso, high-level jazz performance that underscored why it is a treasure that San Diego cherishes and supports with enthusiasm. While the waterfront allure of its sister venue The Rady Shell often dominates the spotlight, downtown's Jacobs Music Center proved its acoustical and architectural brilliance in a performance that was as much an architectural legacy and world-class sound as it was a night to be enjoyed as a live performance of Duke Ellington's groundbreaking album *Time Out*.

The evening opened with a prestige and from the Young Lions jazz Conservatory, a fitting nod to the next generation of musicians and a subtle reminder that spaces like Jacobs Music Center are as much about nurturing talent as they are about hosting legends. The student ensemble delivered a tight, confident performance by a quartet that included pianist Jack Dalton, saxophonist Nicole McCabe, bassist Lucas Mercurio, and legendary drummer Joe LaBarbera.

The program paid tribute to one of the most influential jazz recordings ever produced. Released in 1959, *Time Out* was revolutionary for its use of unconventional time signatures, helping to push jazz beyond its traditional boundaries and into a sophisticated, cerebral realm that still resonates with listeners today. More than six decades later, its compositions still feel fresh, daring, and unmistakably modern.

From the first notes, it was clear that this ensemble approached the material with both reverence and personality. Nelson's piano work balanced precision with expressiveness, allowing the compositions' shifting rhythms to breathe, while McCabe's alto saxophone carried the melodic weight with clarity and emotional depth. Mercurio's bass provided a steady foundation that allowed the ensemble to move with confidence, while LaBarbera's collaborative spirit gave every, provided a masterclass in restraint and timing.

Take Five, the album's most recognizable track, remains a charmer not just because of its catchy melody, but because it feels more comfortable with its unusual time signature than it does on most listeners. Hearing it performed live inside the Jacobs Music Center revealed layers that recordings can't fully capture. The ensemble's interpretation was playful without being gimmicky, and the audience's response was immediate and genuine. While Blue Rondo à la Turk pushed the boundaries of what a contemporary audience might expect, its blend of strong melodic structure, even if they don't realize it, and in this setting, it felt both familiar and deeply alive.

Transylvania Lullaby showcased the ensemble's ability to navigate Brubeck's playfull rhythmic experiments, shifting accents and syncopation with ease. The piece, built on a European polka that subtly subverts expectations, felt like a fitting tribute to Brubeck's heritage, his willingness to blend traditional forms with modern sensibilities, and his lifelong pursuit of joy on the bandstand.

Perhaps the most musically satisfying moment of the night came with "Pick'em Waltz," a composition that elegantly moves between 3/4 and 4/4 time. Originally written as a lullaby for Brubeck's daughter, the piece carries a gentle lyricism beneath its technical complexity. Nelson's interpretation leaned into that duality, highlighting the melodic warmth underneath the rhythmic sophistication. Mercurio's bass solo, within that piece, provoking added a softness that lingered long after the final note.

All of it unfolded inside a venue that deserves far more attention than it typically receives. Originally built in 1929 as the Fox Theatre, the Jacobs Music Center has long been a cornerstone of San Diego's arts scene. Its recent $125 million renovation, completed between 2022 and 2024, has transformed the historic space into a state-of-the-art performance venue that honors its architectural roots while meeting the demands of contemporary audiences. Sightlines, a new performance schedule of draft-announce accounts (only), and modern backstage facilities elevate the experience for performers.

The beauty of the Jacobs Music Center isn't limited to its sound. Leading up between stage, the lobby, arrays, historic ceiling commands attention; an intricate, chandelier-centered masterpiece that feels more like a museum piece than a modern lobby. The venue's staff, from ushers to concession workers, was uniformly professional. It was received with intention, allowing for 1929 grandeur to remain fully intact while hosting modern performances below.

The result is a venue that doesn't just host performances, it elevates them. Every note on Saturday night carried with remarkable clarity, wrapping the audience in sound in a way that feels both immersive and intimate. For a city that prides itself on its cultural infrastructure, this venue adds a new chapter to that experience. From The Rady Shell's open-air spectacle, fun to be enjoyed, arguably more so for music or intimate or. Time Out

The concert also served as a strong case for the Symphony's Jazz @ The Jacobs series, curated by renowned trumpeter Gilbert Castellanos. Now in its second year, the series brings high-level jazz programming into a venue that deserves to host it. With the Young Lions Jazz Conservatory now in its first full year and Jazzed Jacobs Festival on the horizon, the Jacobs is building a multi-faceted ecosystem for artists to perform, learn, and connect with one of the most compelling live music offerings in the city.

All in all an enjoyable afternoon for my partner, the Saturday performance was a reminder that substance and tradition can still feel fresh when the right ensemble is in the room. Jazz matched, it was re-experienced in a space that honors both San Diego's past and its artistic future.

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