

The evolution of 'Evolution'

By Philip Elwood

"Evolution of the Blues" was a title adopted, rather haphazardly, by the master of jazz vocalese Jon Hendricks to give a name to his fascinating bit of on-stage musical history (which covered the black American's contribution to the world's music) at the Monterey Jazz Festival in 1960.

After numerous changes a professionally produced "Evolution of the Blues" came into the On Broadway theater last August, with Hendricks as narrator-singer-interlocutor. The show was then a marvelous oasis of exhilarating sound in the usually dehydrated and derivative local musical stage.

In the subsequent 10 months "Evolution" itself has evolved, and much for the better. The current presentation which seems sure to last through the summer, is more entertaining, more varied and more valid than any of its predecessors.

I certainly am no one to engage in a comparison of the lead, as now played by Oscar Brown, Jr., with the role as originated and portrayed by Hendricks. Both men are magnificent artists — creative, spirited and distinctively hip. Hendricks conceived the theme and wrote many of the lines used by Brown; Brown, who actually is less dominant in the current production than was the case with Hendricks in the original, is responsible for the lyrics to seven selections — including "Brown Baby," which Hendricks also sang.

There are three other featured (female) singers; seven dancers perform and a quintet of musicians led by the superb bassist Vernon Alley backs the whole show.

The theme is simple, the



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talents natural and often spectacular. Black Africans brought a musical heritage to America that survived centuries of servitude and segregation; that music (whether "blues," "spirituals," "ragtime" or "jazz") is familiar to the world — and the cast of "Evolution" reminds us of that fact with every song, every note and every foot-tap and hand-clap.

Millie Foster is a fine spiritual singer early in the show and a splendidly suggestive interpreter of Lil Green's "Why Don't You Do Right" later on. Bianca Thorton is a knockout on "I Told Jesus," from the Gospel tradition and later is smashing on "Lover Man," from Billie Holiday's book.

Vaughn Reddie sings "Some Stopped On de Way" (a calypso number) and returns later to become a singing waitress and hostess within a "St. Louis

Blues" routine which leads to a long night-club routine.

Verlin Sandles, one of the most beautiful and poised singers I have ever heard, sings a bit of Duke's "Come Sunday" and a glorious "Closer Walk with Thee."

Brown sings Miles Davis' "All Blues" beautifully and later on does his "The Snake," following it with a poignant and nostalgic original lyric version of "The Entertainer."

The dancing, especially of Ben Dunn and Sandra McPherson, is spectacularly effective — and the inclusion of Bernie Ware (one of the original "Step Brothers") gives us a rare chance to see a master tap-dancer off the Apollo Theater boards in action.

The evolved "Evolution" is first class stuff. Go yourself and take your visiting friends during the summer.