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Toots Thielemans Makes His Harmonica Sing

BY JESSE HAMLIN

Toots Thielemans, the impish Belgian harmonica wizard and whistler, sat crosslegged on a stool at Kimball's Thursday night and offered "little prayers" to two of his deities — Thelonious Monk and Duke Ellington.

He filled the famous first five notes of "Round Midnight" with poignancy, let the sound fade, then told the packed house, "those notes say it all." Silence settled over the room as the little man with the funny instru-

ment began to strike at the brooding core of Monk's masterpiece.

Thielemans' amazing achievement — to make the harmonica sing with the brilliance of a trumpet or violin while improvising intricate melodic passages — seems even greater when you hear the harmonic inventiveness, depth of feeling and all out swing that he brings to the music.

Performing with the outstanding trio of Larry Vuckovich on piano, drummer Don Bailey and bassist

Larry Grenadier, Toots got to the heart of everything he played, from Monk's barreling blues, "Straight, No Chaser" to "The Mooche," one of Ellington's early Cotton Club numbers that Thielemans played on guitar with the tenderest touch, sounding a little like a soft-spoken rural bluesman.

He made his phrases on "Body and Soul" sigh like Billie Holiday, making the wood of his harmonica vibrate with human vulnerability, bending and smearing notes like a trumpeter.