

DATEBOOK

At Keystone Korner

A Personal Hard-Bop Style

By Thomas Albright

The Ted Curson Sextet, this week's billing at Keystone Korner, is actually Curson and his long-time right arm, saxophonist Nick Brignola, joined by four of the Bay Area's busier sidemen: trombonist Julian Priester, pianist Larry Vucovitch, bassist James Leary and drummer Eddie Marshall.

They add up to a good deal more than the customary pick-up band, however. Thanks to what must have been some intensive rehearsal, and to the common vocabulary that seems to be coming back increasingly to jazz, the group sounded like a reasonably well schooled unit even as they opened Tuesday's first set, and they proceeded to grow both tighter and looser, in the appropriate places.

Curson came up in the late '50s and early '60s in the school of hard bop, leaning toward what was then "avant-garde" (Mal Waldron, Max Roach, a brief stint with Cecil Taylor and almost two years with Charles Mingus and Eric Dolphy).

At some point during an 11-year stay in Europe — from which he returned only two years ago — the more "outside" features seem to have disappeared from Curson's style, or to have been absorbed into it (an occasional Don Cherry-like volley on pocket trumpet). His music now is grounded basically in the idiom of classical hard-bop, although it has plenty of personal inflections of its own.

As Mingus did, Curson frequently gives his six pieces the weight and texture of a big band, preserving the sense of spontaneity and individualism of the standard small combo, but curbing the tendency to outsized solos and adding more ensemble playing.

He keeps the rhythm section



Ted Curson: burning with intensity

churning relentlessly, and one of his most characteristic touches is to bring in the other two horns to underscore the soloist at the end of every chorus or two with simple unison vamps or more raggedy call-response figures (albeit not as cacophonous as Mingus' instrumental hollers). Like a bass drum "bomb," the device sometimes has the effect of launching the soloist into the next chorus as though he had just been shot from a catapult.

Curson is a solid soloist himself, with a fluid, light-footed trumpet style that has roots in early Miles Davis and Clark Terry — capable of burning with a bright intensity when the occasion requires, or of changing pace to a reflective, lyrical ballad style (the latter, generally, on fluegelhorn). Priester achieves a similar maturity of feeling in his suave-toned, cleaned-up trombone improvisations.

Brignola is more overtly fiery, negotiating dazzlingly fast and intricate bop-styled phrases on baritone sax and playing a full-bodied soprano on material that called for a more modal, Coltrane-based ap-

proach.

Leary and Marshall performed brilliantly, as usual, and some of the most adventurous playing of the evening came from Vucovitch. He did some cliffhanger feats with unexpected ritardandos, and took one solo that seemed like an articulated blur in which a percussive Bartok Mikrokosmos was superimposed over a Bud Powell cascade.

This is not a group in which spectacular solos are prominent, however. Curson's principal strength is not so much as an exceptional individual stylist, but as a strong leader, inventive arranger and, not least, a highly individual composer (all of the material Tuesday — including such outstanding pieces as "Reva's Waltz" and "Tears for Dolphy" — was Curson's own).

The emphasis is on balance, and strong, solid blowing. The result is some finely wrought music — extroverted and outgoing, but not patronizing; consistently listenable; and occasionally, quite exciting.