

# Mike Allen moving mainstream

*Young saxman's improvisations simple yet witty*

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THE GAZETTE

**S**axophonist Mike Allen is doing something too few of Montreal's young jazz musicians get to do: he's playing regularly, and on his own terms.

Allen, a 24-year-old native of Kingston, Ont., is in the second week of a productive month. His trio is the Wednesday-night house band at Le Tycoon, a cozy Sherbrooke St. club better known for rock than jazz.

And on Thursdays at Claudio's on St. Paul St., he's organizing Mike Allen Presents, a four-week series that matches him with some of the best mainstream players in town.

"I think it's important for all the young guys to do a lot of experimentation with different formations, different styles, different jazz idioms," Allen said in a recent interview.

Mike Allen Presents is a chance for Allen to do that. The first instalment in the series, last Thursday, featured the saxophonist's

band from Le Tycoon: bassist Alec Walkington and drummer Ted Warren. Tonight, Allen will play duets with the remarkable pianist Jon Ballantyne. His cohorts on April 19 will be drummer Dave Laing and bassist George Mitchell.

(A duet with drummer Pete Magadini was supposed to close the series April 26, but that's up in air now that Allen's quartet will be competing that night in the Alcan Jazz Competition semi-finals.)

It's a varied bunch of shows, and the Ballantyne duet in particular promises several challenges and rewards.

"I've worked with Jon for a couple of years," Allen said of the Juno Award-winning pianist. "We've composed tunes together, and recorded a tape that wasn't released. (Tonight's show) is just a chance to hear what we've done together."

The two bass-drum teams are frequent sidemen in the city's clubs. Laing and Mitchell, an assured pair solidly in the bebop tradition, are in the supper-hour house band at Bidle's.

Walkington and Warren, who studied with Allen at McGill University, play together all the time — most recently with Ballantyne at the Mile End, where Warren's rhythmic assurance and flexibility marked him as one of the most promising drummers in town.

As for Allen, he showed why he deserves a showcase last Wednesday as he kicked off his residency at Le Tycoon.

Like many young players, Allen is still working through the tenor saxophone legacy of John Coltrane, but he shows signs of finding his own way.

His sound on ballads is full and tender, and he's learning the value of simplicity in his improvisations. And he's likely to surprise with his witty manipulation of rhythm.

He's a quiet, reserved fellow, but he was clearly enjoying himself last week. "The chance to play twice weekly is just a joy," he said. "I also think that at the level I'm at, I should be playing a lot."

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