

Finding a Balance at Dizzy's

By [WILL FRIEDWALD](#)

There aren't many contemporary-music experiences that send listeners home humming a new melody they've just heard for the first time. Modern jazz largely ceased to be "about" tunes a long time ago, and pop music and even current-day Broadway can hardly claim to have done any better. Yet every time the composer and pianist Cedar Walton releases a new album (as he has just done with "The Bouncer") or brings his band to Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola (which he is doing for the next two weeks), you will hear at least one unforgettable new melody, and it will remain in your head for much longer than the train ride home.



Alan Nahigian

Cedar Walton is the only artist invited to play Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola for two consecutive weeks every year.

One of the frequently expressed observations about Mr. Walton, now 77, is that he's not as recognized as he should be by the general public (unlike, say, Herbie Hancock). Still, there's nothing wrong with being appreciated by one's fellow musicians; you'll hear his tunes played by appreciative saxophonists and trumpeters all over town, and he is the only active writer represented in HighNote Records's "Composer Collection" series. Released last year, "Volume Six: Cedar Chest" (he has a high tolerance for puns on his woody name) features 10 Walton standards interpreted by that many bands.

"Cedar is also one of the truly great composers in jazz," said pianist Bill Charlap. "His compositions, such as 'Bolivia,' 'Firm Roots' and 'Holy Land,' are just a few that have become jazz standards. When he plays, I can always hear the composer in him, from his deeply distinct melodic line to the clarity of his harmonic language. He is a true master."

Then, too, Mr. Walton is fully appreciated by record labels—like HighNote Records, which has released seven Walton albums in the last decade, and impresarios like Todd Barkan of Jazz at Lincoln Center, who has made Mr. Walton the only artist to play Dizzy's two contiguous weeks every year since the club opened six years ago. The first week features his quartet, with saxophonist Vincent Herring, bassist David Williams and drummer Willie Jones III. Next week, trombonist Steve Turre will join the mix.

"That's just something I stumbled into, blending the trombone and sax," Mr. Walton said in a recent phone interview from his home in Brooklyn, "The trumpet can be a little heavy, but the trombone tends not to overshadow the piano too much."

A native of Dallas, Mr. Walton began his career in earnest not long after he left the army, in

1958. During the next few years he apprenticed with trombonist J.J. Johnson and saxophonist Benny Golson, two top-drawer composer-instrumentalists. "J.J. Johnson was my first big-league affiliation," he said. "Watching him and working with him was just pure perfection."

In 1961, Mr. Walton joined the Jazz Messengers, where leader and drummer Art Blakey encouraged him to write as much as possible. "I was happy to accommodate Mr. Blakey," he said. "Since he didn't write, we contributed as much as we could." Mr. Walton wrote enough for the Messengers to fill several albums, including such standards as "Ugetsu" and "Mosaic." The latter is a particularly stunning example of how to integrate a powerful soloing drummer into an ensemble without letting him predominate. "As soon as we could get enough compositions together to complete an album, we would just go in the studio."

He left the Messengers after three road-weary years of continuous touring ("It was just a mind-boggling activity, it seemed like we were never home.") He remained in New York to be with his family and play at the Five Spot with a trio led by drummer Tootie Heath. Over the next 10 years or so, he gradually established himself as a bandleader, cutting the first album under his own name—literally: it was called "Cedar!"—in 1967. Mr. Walton recalled that one of the first club owners to accept him as a leader was Lincoln Center's Barkan, who was then running Keystone Komer in San Francisco.

New York clubs are fairly empty in August, but this month you can bet that Dizzy's will be packed with musicians, eager for a lesson. As fellow pianist Renee Rosnes described it, "his touch on the piano is distinctly personal, with a bell-like tone. His playing exudes an earthiness that suggests the blues are never far away. Without a doubt, he is one of the most influential, swinging pianists in jazz."