



By Clare Tyrrell

Jazz is a musical form that has been maliciously hijacked by hotel lobbies. Somehow, on the journey from the pulsing throb of Harlem's underground bars, it re-surfaces world-wide diluted and soulless as the bland background soundtrack of modern travel. So, it was with some reluctance that we traipsed over to the Kowloon Shangri-La to listen to their new jazz band.

On our arrival we could not have been more flabbergasted. Turning the final corner of the thickly carpeted steps up to the mezzanine floor, a wave of raw energy slammed into us. We immediately perked up, and practically ran up the remaining steps. Hurtling into the black lacquer panels and cherry woodwork of the Blue Note we spotted three groovy guys jamming out a vibrant tune that flew like fire through the air. We sat down and soaked it up with glee. For the next two months these players, the Brook Giles Trio and British jazz singer Alexia Gardner, will be taking over the Blue Note.

A professional singer since 1993, Gardner has been touring Asia's top hotels for the last few years, performing her ballads and jazz classics. Joining her from New York are three extraordinary musicians. In charge of the rhythm is George Gray, a veteran drummer. "I usually classify myself as an R'n'B drummer," he explains, "cause my roots stem from playing R'n'B. I started working in the late '70s with a group from Baltimore called Pockets. We were produced by Verdine and Maurice White from Earth Wind and Fire. From there I ended up working with such artists as Stevie Wonder, Abdullah Ibrahim, Jessie Johnson, Stanley Jordan, Ronnie Jordan..." The list just didn't cease. Joining him is the main man himself Brooks Giles III. A musician who has traveled to Hong Kong three times before, Giles's smile stretches as much as the golden blasts he sends flying out of his sax. Grinning, he marvels at how he first saw Gray play at an Earth, Wind and Fire gig when he was 14. "It's such an honor to be playing with him, never mind taking him on the road."

Sat in the center of the stage with his keyboard set before him is the third member of the trio, George von Essen. Originating from Frankfurt, Germany, Von Essen has the air of Bob Dylan and the finger flying acrobatics of a true maestro. Using the Hammond sound (which he'd originally heard live in the aptly named Lickedy Split Club on 137th Street) he brings a new sound to Hong Kong's jazz lovers. "There's a big organ tradition that's coming back now in New York," he murmurs. "There have been clubs in Harlem that have had organs going through from the '50s to now. It's the original Hammond B3 sound, though my Hammond is not portable, so I have to use a Korg