

They Got The Blues, With a Cue From TV

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solo, bending notes on a keyboard to imitate a guitar; Mr. Marsalis could only chuckle and shake his head.

And out came Willie Nelson, clutching his battered guitar, mumbling his way through a marvelously casual version of "Night Life."

Each guest performer contributed only a song or two or three, with Mr. Fishburne invariably supplying introductions and explanations. In deference, perhaps, to the old tradition of public television, there were no commercials, although halfway through, Mr. Fishburne preached a blustery "blues sermon" (written by Stanley Crouch) that might have been the perfect time for a bathroom break.

The overall effect was entertaining but also dizzying; with so many performers squeezed into a little over an hour, the concert often felt like one long montage.

Still, there were a few moments that would have been worth rewinding. When Audra McDonald came out to sing Duke Ellington's stately "Creole Love Call," Mr. Marsalis upstaged her with a wild trumpet solo that ended with the instrumental equivalent of laughter.

And then there was the singer Carrie Smith, whose sly, purring voice was drenched with vibrato. While many of the other documentarians emphasized blues history, she delivered the delicious lyrics as if she were more interested in settling a score. "When you get good loving, never go and spread the news," she sang, with the tassels on her red dress swaying in time to the beat. And then the punchline: "Some old gal will come along, / leave you with them empty-bed blues."



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Laurence Fishburne, host of "Blowin' the Blues Away," at the Apollo Theater on Monday.