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Marsalis's Stylishly Solid Septet, Feeling Right at Home

By BEN RATLIFF

When the Wynton Marsalis Septet played the theme of Thelonious Monk's "Hackensack" on Tuesday night at the Village Vanguard, every quarter of the four-horn front line carried a controlled, distinct weight. Each musician projected a particular volume and tone, and the sum was a fine, calibrated mix. You could hear it all and marvel at the craft in it.

There's nothing else like this group; perhaps until the marketplace demands it, there won't be. The septet comes from the core of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, which tours widely and inevitably shares some repertory with it. In a sense it's all one intertwined, ongoing project. During the first half of the 90's, the septet's innovations were in many ways overshadowed by Mr. Marsalis's activities as artistic director for Jazz at Lincoln Center. For many who followed his pronouncements, he became more

identified with ideals of aesthetic responsibility for jazz than with his actual music.

Five years ago the band took an indefinite break. Now, well into Mr. Marsalis's career as a composer of long-form works as well as his development of Lincoln Center's jazz programming, it is a good deal easier to separate the workings of the institutional program and his sprightly septet.

The septet's new seven-disc set, "Live at the Village Vanguard" (Columbia/Sony), selects performances at that club from 1990 to 1994, and the group's homecoming upon its release was a necessary step to prove that nothing heard on the album was a matter of chance. The album's sound quality is first rate, but in Tuesday night's early set the real thing was better. The low-ceilinged, triangular room gave the music astonishing warmth and clarity.

Of course much of that can be attributed to the band. During the first stretch of the septet's life — and chances are that this

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Wynton Marsalis and his septet are at the Village Vanguard through Sunday.

Jack Vartoogian for The New York Times