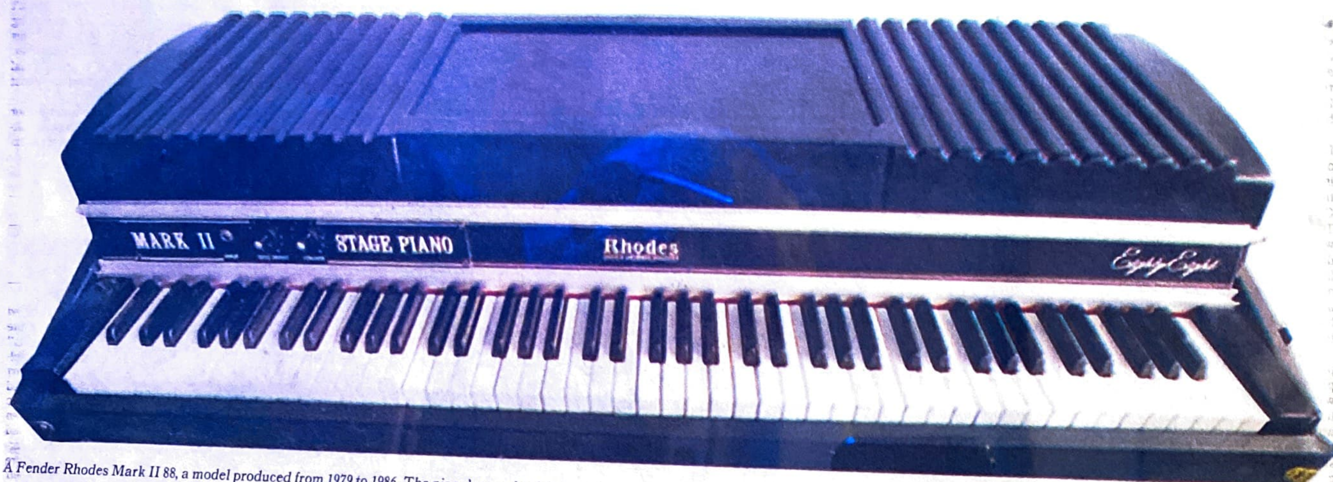
A 70's Castoff Returns to the Bandstand



A Fender Rhodes Mark II 88, a model produced from 1979 to 1986. The piano's comeback is in part a response to today's digitized culture, an insistence that the analog world still has something to offer.

G. Paul Burnett/The New York Times

By DAVID R. ADLER

NOT long ago, straight-ahead jazz musicians tended to dismiss the Fender Rhodes electric piano as a cheesy relic of the 1970's. Some still do. But in the last couple of years, the Rhodes has cropped up on well over a dozen recordings by younger jazz artists. By injecting the vintage sound of the Rhodes into modern acoustic settings, jazz's next generation is pioneering a new sound by means of an old, rusty electric tool.

Chances are you've heard the shimmering, ethereal sound of the Fender Rhodes before — think back to Billy Joel's "Just the Way You Are" or Paul Simon's "Still Crazy After All These Years" or Dave Grusin's theme from the television show "Taxi." Today's jazz artists seem drawn to the instrument's easy-on-the-ears quality and pop familiarity, but mainly they like the way it can color and sustain a complex harmony, add a slightly dirty edge to a rock-inflected rhythm or sing with chime-like single notes during a solo. Not only are pianists themselves embracing the sound; more and more horn players are expecting Rhodes proficiency from their piano sidemen.

Jazz musicians who have had a hand in the Rhodes revival include the saxophonists Mark Shim, Chris Cheek and Jimmy Greene; the trumpeters Ingrid Jensen and Erik Truffaz; the bassist Avishai Cohen; the drummer Brian Blade; and the pianists David Kikoski, George Colligan and Kevin Hays, among many others. At the "Wall to Wall Miles Davis" program, which took place at Symphony Space in March, Dave Douglas, the celebrated trumpeter and composer, showed off his New Quintet, with the pianist Uri Caine on — you guessed it — Fender Rhodes. The drummer Bobby Previte, who opened the show playing music from Davis's classic album "Bitches Brew" with his 11-piece Voodoo Down Orchestra, made sure to include not one but two Fender Rhodes pianos, played expertly by Russ Lossing and Jon Dryden.

Miles Davis made extensive use of the Rhodes during his "electric" period, and the Columbia/Legacy label has let forth a flood of reissues and previously unreleased sessions from this controversial time in Davis's career, which may partly explain the Rhodes's newfound popularity. As the era of jazz fusion progressed, the Rhodes remained an integral component in the keyboard arsenals of Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea, Josef Zawinul and others. It was also a fairly common sound in classic rock groups like the Doors, Steely Dan and Pink Floyd. Stevie Wonder made it a staple of 1970's R & B. "I grew up on the sound of the Rhodes," said the alto saxophonist Steve Wilson. He and his peers are now looking for ways to use that sound in their own work.

Invented in the 1940's by Harold Rhodes, who died last year at 90, the instrument became popular after World War II as a pianistic counterpart to the electric guitar. Not incidentally, the guitar maker Leo Fender bought Mr. Rhodes's company in 1959 and went on to manufacture the Rhodes piano in a variety of classic models. After changing hands several times, the Rhodes product name was taken over by the Japan-based Roland Corporation in 1987, but Rhodes bought back the rights three years before his death. No new models have been released since 1991, and today one must look around to acquire a vintage Fender Rhodes in good condition — a fact that only increases its cult-like appeal among players and collectors.

In the digital age, the Rhodes seems an absurd impracticality, an analog beast that simply won't die. It's heavy, difficult to transport and takes up a lot of on-stage room. It's also fragile, and replacement parts can be hard to find. And like an acoustic piano, it goes out of tune. These days, smaller and easier is considered better, and the Rhodes violates every information-age rule of portability and convenience. Some of the instrument's most public devotees don't even own one, but they'll go so far as to require that one be made available to them wherever they perform. "Every set I play is 20 percent Rhodes," the pianist Jacky Terrasson said, "so I make sure it's in the contract."

Why all the trouble? For the sound, which can't quite be replicated by digital means. The Rhodes's comeback is in part a response to digitized culture, an insistence that the analog world of the past still has something to offer. "With a Rhodes," Mr. Terrasson said, "you're dealing with metal and wood, not computer chips."

On the other hand, the new Rhodes-mania is entirely in keeping with the cultural moment. Beck, the quintessential postmodern pop star, has a fetish for vintage keyboard sounds — not to mention another supposedly antiquated technology, the turntable. Innovative groups on the margins of pop, like Portishead and Cibo Matto, have made use of the Rhodes sound. So have contemporary neo-soul acts like D'Angelo and Erykah Badu. The pianist Jason Moran observes that "a lot of the samples rappers have used are actually Rhodes samples." Just as pop music continually intersects with hip-hop, R & B and electronica, so, too, does jazz. The edgy, retro sound of the Rhodes is a part of this process. It's significant in this regard that Herbie Hancock, one of the first jazz pianists to popularize the Rhodes, went on to make dance records in the 1980's. Continuing in Mr. Hancock's footsteps, the pianist Marc Cary surprised fans last year when he released an electronica album. The title was "Rhodes Ahead, Volume One."

The Fender Rhodes electric piano is being rediscovered by the next generation of jazz musicians.

But more often than not, on today's jazz recordings the Rhodes appears in an acoustic setting. Its sound is all the more stark and enchanting when heard in tandem with an upright bass and other traditional jazz instruments. Such juxtapositions differentiate the Rhodes resurgence from warmed-over fusion and watered-down "smooth jazz." In the best instances, a Rhodes can even enhance the subtle, advanced interplay of an acoustic jazz group. "The voicings that sound good on a Rhodes tend to be more sparse," the pianist Jason Lindner said. "You can play less and still be very present." This deployment of the Rhodes as a de facto acoustic instrument enjoyed a brief vogue in the 1960's and 1970's, but it went away too quickly, its full potential unexplored.

Most artists prefer to feature the Rhodes sparingly, on just a few of an album's tracks. On "Motherland," the pianist Danilo Perez weaves his Rhodes into the sonic fabric of an ambitious, pan-Latin symphony of sorts. Mr. Lindner, on his "Premonition," employs it to vary his big-band textures. Mr. Moran and Mr. Terrasson use it in trio contexts, sometimes moving back and forth between Rhodes and acoustic piano within a single composition. On "Facing Left," Mr. Moran occasionally overdubs Rhodes chords for an effect he likens to a string section. In the Dave Douglas New Quintet, however, Uri Caine plays Rhodes exclusively. Mr. Douglas wrote music for the group with the sound of the Rhodes specifically in mind.

Some may argue that the Rhodes resurgence is a passing fancy, perhaps even a gimmick. But this new music is devoid of calculation. It surges with a genuine creative impulse. The Rhodes, in many instances, has encouraged modern jazz artists to hear and imagine in new ways, and this is to be welcomed. If anyone is capable of making great and lasting art with the instrument, it is Mr. Douglas, whose prolific experimentation has led him to embrace other unorthodox keyboard instruments like the harmonium and the accordion. But ultimately, jazz's creative prospects do not rest with any one artist, instrument or technology. Whether or not the Rhodes persists as a major force in jazz, for the moment its role is one of revitalization. □

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An Essential Element In the Voice Of Jazz

By BRENT HAYES EDWARDS

FOR many musicians, the death of J. J. Johnson, who took his own life in February after a long struggle with prostate cancer, was the devastating loss of one of the giants of postwar American music. Johnson's departure was even more of a blow because it came so soon after the Ken Burns documentary "Jazz," which did not even mention Johnson and largely neglected his chosen instrument, the trombone.

The history of jazz has almost exclusively been a story of great

our or Thelonious Monk's alluring opacity. Musicians sometimes joke about the "types" who are drawn to various instruments, and even for more flamboyant performers (Roswell Rudd, Frank Lacy, Craig Harris), there's some truth to the image of the trombonist as the paradigmatic

Often overlooked, the