

Pops concert pays tribute to Count Basie

Two orchestras join forces for performance worthy of legendary big band leader.

By **MÁRCIO BEZERRA**

Special To The Daily News

The Palm Beach Pops ended its concert series with a rousing and historic Jazz Extravaganza Tuesday at the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts.

Playing alongside the legendary Count Basie Orchestra, under the direction of Bill Hughes, Bob Lappin and his musicians presented a jazz program in which — to quote an audience member — there was never a dull moment.

Indeed, from the first measures of the opening piece — Duke Ellington's *It Don't Mean a Thing* — one could feel the level of excitement in the air.

Following its traditional format, the orchestra played alone in the first part. Because of earlier audience requests, Lappin participated more actively, playing the piano in each of the selections. Among them, a tasteful medley of Gershwin songs and Jim van Heusen's *Here's That Rainy Day*. Another number, *The Man I Love* by George Gershwin, received a concerto-like reading in which Lappin displayed his well-known style.

Throughout the first part of the program the orchestra was remarkably cohesive, thanks in part to the strong rhythmic section that bound everything together. And, thankfully, there was no reworked Puccini aria this time.

As good as the opening part was, the program became noticeably better in the second part with the arrival of the Count



Bill Hughes and the Count Basie Orchestra joined the Palm Beach Pops in celebration of the 100th birthday of Count Basie Tuesday at the Kravis Center.

Basie Orchestra. A 19-member brass ensemble, it has faithfully retained that legendary sound audiences enjoyed in the heyday of the big bands. Hughes, its present director, has worked in the ensemble since 1953, performing with the Count at countless festivals and special celebrations worldwide.

He and Lappin gracefully shared the stage for the remainder of the concert and each selection was performed in arrangements that highlighted the best of each group. Thus, most of the time the Pops' string section would play the introduction to the numbers, followed by the Count Basie Orchestra. Each selection allowed for solos that ranged from hair-raising virtuosity to lush legato playing by members of the guest orchestra.

The two ensembles were briefly joined by singer Melba Joyce, whose renditions of *Chicago* and *It's Magic* left one

wanting more of her singing.

But the evening had a clear instrumental focus and the two groups closed the unforgettable concert with that big-band-era anthem, *Sing, Sing, Sing* by Benny Goodman. A traditional season closer for the Pops, it was rearranged to allow the two ensembles to dialogue in the way of a true jam session, highlighted with a virtuosic duel by their respective drummers. The result was a standing ovation in which the bravi and shouts for more were clearly deserved.

By sharing the stage with another director, Lappin has demonstrated his unselfish commitment to the diffusion of the American songbook. One should look forward to the next season of the Palm Beach Pops, one of few truly venerable (if underappreciated) musical institutions of South Florida.