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MUSIC REVIEW

Adult Contemporary's Darling Shows Off His Range



Chris Botti performed selections from his latest album, "Italia," as well as older material on Tuesday night at the Blue Note.

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It's easy to like the trumpeter Chris Botti. It's easy not to like him, too. Since the release of his first solo album in 1995, Mr. Botti has burnished an image of pensive romance, achieving stardom in the realm of adult-contemporary pop. His faintly jazz-inflected style — traceable to the Miles Davis of late-1950s vintage, around "Porgy and Bess" and "Kind of Blue" — luxuriates in melody and mood. He's Sting-endorsed and Oprah-approved, with brooding looks that any camera seems to love.

This week Mr. Botti began what has become an annual residency at the Blue Note, in the company of musicians who are better than they strictly need to be: the guitarist Mark Whitfield, the pianist Peter Martin, the bassist Robert Hurst and the drummer Billy Kilson. The group's second set on Tuesday night was impressive for its dynamic range, flaring up nearly as often as it simmered.

The first leg of the set fulfilled this contrast nicely. Mr. Botti, backed only by Mr. Martin, opened with "Ave Maria," a selection from his quiet new album, "Italia" (Columbia). He played the pious theme without much embellishment, unless you count the reverb generously applied to his horn. When the rest of the band joined in, a new song emerged — "When I Fall in

Love,ö the title track of Mr. Botti's 2004 breakthrough album ö and with it came a more seductive groove. It lasted a short while, nearly fading out entirely before Mr. Kilson hit a startling backbeat, cueing a funk-girded double time.

At this point any audience member expecting a faithfully cool re-enactment of Mr. Botti's albums might have been forgiven a small gasp. (There were a few.) But the energy of the set was appealing, for the most part, and Mr. Botti was conscientious about keeping the tone relaxed. He even made allowances ö a few too many, actually ö for musical one-liners from Mr. Whitfield, who seemed to relish his role as resident ham.

One hopes it isn't because Mr. Whitfield has grown bored with the gig. He and Mr. Martin each had the chance to fashion concise and effective solos, and Mr. Hurst ö a substitute for James Genus, who will return for most of this engagement ö was typically impeccable. Mr. Kilson sometimes gave the impression of a volcanic force just barely contained.

Of course, Mr. Botti's sumptuous, limpid instrumental voice was the focus of the show, and so the pyrotechnic moments felt a bit diversionary. Not all the set's ballads were winners, but a few ö notably öCaruso,ö which appears on the new album, and öCinema Paradiso,ö which probably would have if Mr. Botti hadn't already recorded it ö played directly to his gallant strengths.

Chris Botti continues through Dec. 25 at the Blue Note, 131 West Third Street, Greenwich Village, (212) 475-8592; bluenote.