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Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

Eric Lewis, one of the busier jazz pianists in New York, at Cleopatra's Needle on the Upper West Side. Greg Hutchinson is on drums.

Paying His Dues, Thinking Big

After a Decade as a Sideman, a Young Jazz Pianist Works Hard to Be Heard

By ANDREW JACOBS

Jazz musicians are born to be broke.

It is an axiom many musicians have internalized over the years. Even some of the biggest names in jazz, like the singer Cassandra Wilson, are thrilled if their records sell 40,000 copies.

"No one enters into this believing they're going to get rich," Ms. Wilson said in an interview. "As a kid, you don't think, 'I'm going to be a jazz musician because they make lots of money.'"

It is a paradigm that Eric Lewis, a 31-year-old pianist and most recently a member of the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, thinks he can change. He may live in a single-room-occupancy hotel near Riverside Park with shared bathrooms, and his bank account may be nearly

barren, but Mr. Lewis has a coterie of big-name boosters cheering for his success, among them Lee Iacocca, Jamie Foxx and his former boss and mentor, Wynton Marsalis.

After nearly a decade as Lincoln Center's pianist, Mr. Lewis quit last month, saying it was time to find a spotlight of his own. "Why should I be a martyr?" he asked after playing his regular Monday night side gig at Cleopatra's Needle, an Upper West Side restaurant that pays him barely enough to cover his cellphone bill. "I want to be compensated in a way that matches what I'm worth."

In recent months, he has been working on the soundtrack for a PBS documentary, a self-financed fictionalized film about his life and the score for a ballet commissioned by the Joffrey.

Mr. Lewis is counting in part on the newfound money and attention that have accompanied the birth of Lincoln Center's \$128 million

jazz emporium at Columbus Circle. His yearning for fame and fortune was only heightened by the ballyhooed inauguration of the jazz center, which has been drawing New York's cultural elite and gushing press attention since it opened in October.

It was through his association with Jazz at Lincoln Center that Mr. Lewis earned the affections of people like James Curley, a benefactor of the jazz program, and Patricia Kennedy, a prominent arts patron who is married to Mr. Iacocca and who is on the Joffrey's board. Despite a steady salary and a touring schedule that takes in a half-dozen countries and a score of American cities each year, Mr. Lewis was not satisfied to be one of 15 musicians who play alongside Mr. Marsalis, the orchestra's artistic director and one of jazz's biggest stars.

It remains to be seen whether Mr. Lewis, a

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shy self-described chess addict whose distinctively vigorous style is much admired in the business, can hit the big time on his own. Bruce Lundvall, the president of Blue Note Records, one of the best-known jazz labels, said it was increasingly difficult to sell instrumentalists. Times have gotten so tough, Mr. Lundvall said, partly because of the spread of illegal downloading, that Blue Note has recently asked some of its artists essentially to agree to pay cuts.

Still, he said he was interested in talking to Mr. Lewis about a record deal, adding: "He's a wonderful player and a flamboyant one at that. I'm very much a fan."

Mr. Lewis is a familiar presence on the New York jazz circuit. On most nights he can be spotted playing downtown's string of basement venues or Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, the plush lounge at Lincoln Center's new temple of jazz. At places like Zinc Bar and Niagara, he often plays until dawn at jam sessions, sweating away at the piano, bathed in the adulation of friends and fans.

After a lifelong struggle with obesity, Mr. Lewis lost 40 pounds last summer (he now weighs 228 pounds and hopes to lose more), an accomplishment he says buoyed his decision to strike out on his own.

"There's a prejudice against fat people," he said. "Now that I lost all this weight, I get more attention. I feel more confident."

It has been a long haul for Mr. Lewis, who has weathered bouts of depression, stretches of poverty and tumultuous periods of self-doubt. He comes from a long line of musicians and grew up in Camden, N.J., the only child of Carol Lewis, a classically trained flutist who strained to make it as a professional musician. His boyhood home, a century-old Victorian in a neighborhood of sagging houses, is cluttered with five pianos and the framed portraits of jazz lu-

minaries whom his mother, with young son in tow, would pursue after concerts.

"I was always dragging him backstage to meet these great musicians," said Ms. Lewis, who works as a middle school band director. "He grew up listening to the masters."

Socially awkward but strikingly self-confident in front of an audience, Mr. Lewis has been tethered to the piano since age 2½, when he first clambered up a stool and started banging on the keys. As a teenager, he flirted with the idea of becoming a classical pianist but his mother, drawing on her own struggles, steered him toward jazz.

"As a black man, I don't know what kind of future he would have had in the classical world," she said.

Mr. Lewis won a scholarship to the Manhattan School of Music, and after graduation spent years apprenticing — with the drummer Elvin Jones, the trumpeter Roy Hargrove, the singer Jon Hendricks and Ms. Wilson. At 13, he caught the eye and ear of Mr. Marsalis, who had come to Camden for a concert; more than a decade later, in 1996, Mr. Marsalis would take him into his ensemble.

"Even back then Eric was an original," Mr. Marsalis said, speaking by phone from the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra's tour bus as it made its way through California. "His playing was playful but also serious to point of being spiritual."

The two have had a close relationship, and Mr. Lewis credits Mr. Marsalis with helping him master the historical and stylistic range of jazz. "At times, it's been adversarial, with him acting like a drill sergeant," Mr. Lewis said. "In those early years, it felt like a hazing."

In 1998, the incessant touring and competitive pressures of sharing a stage with two dozen other egos began to take its toll. During a tour stop in Brazil, Mr. Lewis suffered what he describes as an emotional implosion and abruptly left the band.

Months of panic attacks, depres-



Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

The pianist Eric Lewis in his dressing room at the Jazz at Lincoln Center complex last month, shortly before he left the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

sion and self-recrimination followed. The turning point, Mr. Lewis says, coincided with Christmas of that year, when he approached a police officer outside Tower Records near Lincoln Center and asked for the nearest mental hospital. After a psychiatric exam at Bellevue, Mr. Lewis was surprised to find that he was not seriously ill. "I went to Barnes & Noble, found some books on panic attacks and depression and realized I was not crazy," he said.

Three days later he spotted an ad-

vertisement in *Down Beat* magazine for the Thelonious Monk International Piano Competition, which he had entered, and lost, as a 16-year-old. For the next three months, he spent every waking moment preparing his entry tape.

"Those were very lean times," he said. "I was very alone, I owed people a lot of money and I was surviving on 99-cent boxes of Ronzoni."

He won the competition but owed nearly all of the \$10,000 prize, much of it to a wily group of chess players,

"hustlers" as he calls them, who spend their days in Washington Square Park or in the chess shops on nearby Thompson Street.

Although he is short on cash these days, Mr. Lewis said he did not regret his departure from Lincoln Center. In recent weeks, he has found a manager, taken on more writing for film soundtracks and booked a series of gigs. He may perform at a Los Angeles Oscar party with Jamie Foxx as host. This month he put together a showcase for himself at a Los Ange-

les nightclub that drew a smattering of music industry executives, jazz critics and Hollywood types.

He recognizes that straight jazz is a less-than-lucrative genre and, many of his new compositions include vocals and danceable rhythms. He says he is fed up with the jazz world's obsession with the esoteric, which he sees as keeping many of his peers struggling to make ends meet.

"I just want to make sounds that people dig," Mr. Lewis said, "and make a lot of money doing it."