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TAKE THE MONEY AND PLAY

By THOMAS SANCTON/PARIS

WOODY ALLEN WALKS offstage with a bemused look on his face. In one hand, he holds a clarinet; in the other, a bizarre, cube-shaped plastic sculpture that some fan placed at his feet in lieu of flowers. "That audience was amazing," he says. "They were so sweet. They were bathing us in affection." To prove the feeling is mutual, he heads back out into the spotlight. Some 2,000 Parisians are on their feet, clapping, screaming, chanting, "Wooo-DEE! Wooo-DEE!" Incredible as it seems, Allen--who treats New York City audiences like wallpaper at his weekly gig at Michael's Pub--responds by blowing kisses. Then he calls his fellow band members back onstage for the first of seven encores.

Paris' venerable Olympia concert hall has never seen anything quite like the stir created by Woody Allen and his New Orleans Jazz Band. It's been like that at every stop on Allen's 14-city, 23-day European tour, which ends in London on March 18. In Madrid he needed a police escort to get in from the airport amid what El Mundo called Woodymania. In Barcelona more than 300 autograph seekers mobbed him at the stage entrance. "Woody's having a ball," says his banjo player and musical guru, Eddie Davis. "He's kind of stunned by the reaction. They're treating him like Elvis."

"I expected to play to half-filled houses," Allen says during a pre-concert chat in the band's dressing room, though perhaps it shouldn't have come as too great a surprise that a self-described "amateur" clarinetist who also happens to be a world-famous filmmaker can sell out halls like the Olympia, which recently canceled a concert by jazz great Ornette Coleman owing to low ticket sales. But if fame pulls in the crowds, Allen works hard to send them home happy. "I'm very conscious of the audience. It's not like Michael's Pub, where I just look down at my feet. Here I have to think about the show and talk to the people."

For Allen, who says he used to throw up every night before going onstage as a comedian, speaking to live audiences is marginally less painful than winning an Oscar. But in the concert setting, he seems to enjoy it, peppering his

comments with jokes and repartee. In Paris, much to the delight of the locals, he does all this in passable French. Midway through the show, he announces a series of clarinet-banjo duets. "The others have to rest their lips," he explains. "But not me. I'm very strong, because I live right. I eat well and sleep well." The audience howls with laughter.

As for the music, what Allen lacks in in clarinet technique he makes up in sheer energy and passion. He goes for what he calls a "crude" sound, based on the styles of New Orleans legends like George Lewis, Albert Burbank and Sidney Bechet. Give him an A for authenticity. Few players today can boast such a powerful tone. That's due partly to his use of an extremely hard reed (Rico No. 5, about one step down from a roof shingle) and partly to his penchant for the now obsolete Albert system of keys and fingerings, favored by all the old-timers. When Woody's favorite horn cracked last year, France's Buffet company custom-made two Albert systems for him--the equivalent of Ford turning out a couple of brand new Model Ts.

Allen has been smart enough to surround himself with experienced professionals--Davis, cornetist Simon Wettenhall, trombonist Dan Barrett, bassist Greg Cohen, drummer John Gill and pianist Cynthia Sayer--who provide strong, sensitive backing to his clarinet leads. For more than two hours the band runs through an eclectic repertoire ranging from Dixieland standards and blues to pop and gospel numbers. There are few concessions to showmanship: Allen keeps his eyes closed and legs crossed most of the time, and his stage costume consists of the usual baggy green corduroys, plaid shirt, gray cardigan and the trademark black-rimmed glasses. Which, of course, is exactly what people pay to see. With concert fees reportedly in the \$40,000-plus range, the show seems a lucrative proposition. But for Allen, who hardly needs the money, kicks may be the main payoff.

After the final encore, Allen holds court in a red satin-draped dressing room that looks like the kind of bordellos where jazz was born. Two French political luminaries are ushered in: former Culture Minister Jack Lang and Socialist Party leader Lionel Jospin. Lang, who railed for years against American "cultural imperialism," is now fawning over one of its exemplars. "Woody's music is like a fountain of youth," he gushes.

Half an hour and another dozen well-wishers later, Allen emerges from his dressing room and heads off to dinner with girlfriend Soon-Yi Farrow Previn. "I'll see you guys in Milan," he tells the band, which stays in a separate hotel and flies commercial while Allen travels by private jet. But they're not complaining. The pay is good, and as Sayer points out over a plate of jumbo shrimp and French cheese, "the food's gotten a lot better since we started touring with Woody."

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