

Settling Naturally Into a Stage of Comfort

By [NATE CHINEN](#)

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The guitarist Jim Hall imbues his music with a deep, companionable rightness. His tone, dry and warm, suggests an extension of his personality. His deployment of notes, economical but fluid, complements an unassuming spirit of inquiry. And there's a naturalistic ease behind his relationship with the guitar, which partly explains his pull among inheritors like [Pat Metheny](#) and Bill Frisell, who have separately recorded with him. Everything about his playing is intuitive and rooted in modesty and humor.



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Jim Hall Quartet: The guitarist is leading his group at Birdland.

Mr. Hall, 78, spent most of last year recovering from back surgery, and for a while it wasn't clear when he would begin playing again. He made his return this spring, leading a trio with Steve LaSpina on bass and Joey Baron on drums: the same crew backing him this week at Birdland, along with the alto saxophonist [Greg Osby](#). It's a lithe and sympathetic group, well suited to Mr. Hall's brand of nearly self-effacing lyricism.

Still, it took a little while for things to click in the early set on Tuesday night. Mr. Hall spent much of the opening tune, an original blues called "Furnished Flats," fiddling with his levels and his posture. Mr. Baron and Mr. LaSpina effervesced brightly behind him, filling pockets of space. Mr. Osby, taking his first solo, seemed to be testing the room.

Mr. Hall soon made himself comfortable, embroidering a graceful prelude to the standard "All the Things You Are." During several rounds of improvisation at a springlike waltz tempo, he added a chorus effect, followed by a harmonizer, without losing the acoustic center of his sound. And before the final reprise he played an enigmatic stop-time cadenza: strumming open chords over a pedal point, he ventured past the form of the song while preserving its basic character.

As he settled in, his sidemen piped up. Mr. LaSpina furnished "Beija-Flor," a bossa nova, with a richly sonorous melody; Mr. Baron propelled "Careful," a 16-bar blues, with busy brushwork. As for Mr. Osby, who has memorably appeared on several of Mr.

Hall's albums (and featured Mr. Hall on one of his own), he applied tasteful restraint, aerating his sound and sweetening his attack. He took the lead on "Chelsea Bridge," a Billy Strayhorn ballad, and his finessing of the melody sharpened the air, like a cool blast of wind.

That was the set's penultimate tune, preceding "St. Thomas," the theme song of Mr. Hall's former employer [Sonny Rollins](#). There was nothing trite about the calypso churned out by Mr. Baron and Mr. LaSpina and nothing rote about Mr. Osby's architectural solo. By that point every musician onstage seemed as musically limber as Mr. Hall, and as inclined toward unforced epiphany. Just imagine how they'll sound by Saturday.

Performances continue through Saturday at Birdland, 315 West 44th Street, Clinton, (212) 581-3080, birdlandjazz.com.