

Embick's "Silent Way" Hears Thunderous Applause

by Jonathan Eder

"Jazz in Portland, Oregon is blossoming - even exploding!" That's what's representatives from the Portland Jazz Festival were trumpeting on September 29th, 2011 at PDX Jazz series concert held in McMenamins' Mission Theater.

The evening's program, "In a Silent Way", was headlined by local pianist Ramsey Embick and his magnificent ensemble. The audience was transfixed throughout a Herculean musical retrospective to the acclaimed pianist & composer, Joe Zawinul. Embick's band also incorporated songs by Zawinul's compatriots that exemplified his mighty career including those of alto saxophonist Julian Edwin "Cannonball" Adderley, and noted sax virtuoso Wayne Shorter from the band, Weather Report. Mr. Embick appeared with Devin Phillips on tenor & soprano sax, Damian Erskine on bass, Mark Griffith (Jaco Pastorius Tribute Band) on drums, and Rafael Trujillo on percussion.

The concert began with Embick's inventive solo rendition of the Zawinul classic, "Midnight Mood". The melody was eerily reminiscent of, "Soldaten auf der Wacht", AKA, "Lili Marlène" which was made famous by the singer and actress Marlene Dietrich. The quintet followed up by playing the Cannonball Adderley tune, "Scotch & Water". Embick's powerful group dazzled the audience with an array of the Zawinul tunes including "Country Preacher", "In a Silent Way" (a tune from Zawinul's work with Miles Davis), "Boogie-Woogie Waltz", and "Cannonball". Interlaced throughout the program were two Wayne Shorter songs: "Harlequin" and, "Palladium", and "Jive Samba" which was written by Nat Adderley, and recorded by his brother, Cannonball. The concert concluded with three more miraculous Zawinul arrangements: "Birdland", "A Remark you Made", and "Mercy, Mercy" for the encore.

Legendary Trumpeter Honored

Legendary local trumpeter Thara Memory was also honored at that evening's gala. He spoke at length about his life, and career as a musician.

By age 11, Thara Memory had diligently learned the Haydn trumpet concerto for an audition with the Orlando Junior Symphony, only to be told that, "they don't take colored". Young and naïve of race discrimination, Thara signed up for the audition undeterred, and waited for his "white sounding" name to be called to play, his face hidden in the the bleachers of the audition hall. After playing the complete first movement of the Haydn concerto, Francis Bleek, the symphony's principal trumpet player, crossed the color line, and accepted him as a student.

Thara's initial dream was to be a classical musician and conductor. Yet, he had an odd fascination with jazz, and forced himself to listen to the "wrong notes" played on recordings by his future hero, trumpeter Miles Davis. Memory recalled an early practice session where he began to cry, overwhelmed with the fate that he might never play like Miles. Although Thara secretly held onto this fear for many years, he was able to encourage himself with the prospect that he might someday get close to musical perfection.

In fact, Thara Memory's career could be said to parallel that of Miles Davis. Mr. Memory even crossed paths with Miles in Portland. Mr. Davis, perhaps never having heard Mr. Memory perform, was quoted as saying to Thara, "You probably can't play worth a shit". Undaunted by the crassness of his idol, Thara Memory responded that, "He could hold down his own thing". While Memory laments the fact

that he never got the breaks afforded to well connected musicians like former Oregon Symphony conductor, James Anderson DePreist (nephew of famed opera singer Marian Anderson), Memory has been an ardent educator. He recently founded the American Music Program located at the Pacific Crest Community School and has set a recent goal of cultivating 50 more future jazz musicians.

While jazz is America's national treasure, it still struggles to maintain an audience. Thara Memory believes there is a good reason why the halls at many jazz concerts remain half-filled: There is a lack of commitment to educate young Americans about their indigenous musical heritage. " You have to go down in the elementary schools and bring them up, even though they are about to wipe out music in the Portland public school systems, and privatize it to Ethos".

The Portland Jazz Festival

The Portland Jazz Festival will begin its season at the Winningstad Theater from February 17th to 26th, 2012, with veteran trumpeter Thara Memory playing orchestral arrangements of the music of Miles Davis including, "Sketches of Spain", and "Tutu".

Don Lucoff, the Portland Jazz Festival's managing director gave thanks to all those that supported the event including, KMHD's assistant program director Matt Fleeger, major sponsor Quentin Strode of U.S. Bank , and Alaska Airlines. In addition, Lucoff tipped his hat to Bill Royston, who recently retired as director of the festival.

The Portland Jazz Festival will be held during Black History Month. The festival is also part of the city's Cultural Tourism Initiative which was founded in 2003. Don Lucoff gave thanks to vice president at Travel Portland, Barbara Steinfeld, for playing an important role in the Tourism Initiative.

Links

McMenamins: <http://mcmenamins.com/events/93701-In-A-Silent-Way---A-Tribute-To-Joe-Zawinul>

Ramsey Embick / Piano: <http://ramseyembick.com/>

Damian Erskine / Bass: <http://www.damianerskine.com/>

Mark Griffith /Drums: <http://markgriffith.com/index.htm>

Devin Phillips / Sax: <http://devinphillips.com/>

Thara Memory: <http://www.tharamemory.com/>

PDX Jazz Schedule: <http://pdxjazz.com/artists/thara-memory>