

JazzTimes

Portland Jazz Festival

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In five short years, the Portland Jazz Festival has miraculously jockeyed its way into the short list of American festivals worth heeding closely. The recipe for success—if it can be called that—is actually deceptively simple: take a programming agenda that is balanced, savvy and adventurous by degrees, an attractive, cooperative and workable (plus *walkable*) city, and keep a grip on quality control. It also takes a director with stubborn vision, and director Bill Royston seems to have the right stuff. The buzz continues to grow.

For the power-packed first weekend of the 10-day 2008 model, the festival boasted a pair of sometimes-elusive avant-jazz icons, Ornette Coleman (pictured) and Cecil Taylor, on Friday night and Sunday afternoon, respectively. Naturally enough, the festival grabbed as its maxim the phrase “the shape of jazz to come,” from Coleman’s prophetic 1959 album title.

Far from running on old fuel, the forward-thinking septuagenarians are playing mightily these days. Coleman, who showed up at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall in his hip sapphire suit and his beloved saxophonic voice intact, has been hitting the circuit with uncommon regularity of late. His current three-bass-hit band—one acoustic and two electrics—plus kindred kin, drummer Denardo, is sounding better than ever, propped up by its own layered, poetic logic.

Taylor, over at the Marriott by the Willamette River, offered up a transfixing 75-minute solo set, dressed in white with pants tucked into his socks and playing from a sonic palette favoring bluish brooding, artful bashing and a poetic recitation. Caught in the flow of characteristically free associative, Taylor-ed language were telling morphemes, referring to “the web and weave of the ongoing” and “oriented organisms of sound, sound, sound.” Taylor’s words conveyed fluid relevance to his music-making process.

Surprisingly, Taylor was in a relatively lyrical spirit, coaxing up ferocity only sparingly between extended explorations of impressionistic meets Cubist arpeggios and terse chords. More easily associative “Cecil-isms” could actually be heard coming from the hands of Myra Melford, with her provocative electro-acoustic group, Be Bread, and by the underrated piano wonder Craig Taborn. Taborn was sounding especially fiery in the late-night set at the Winningstad Theatre by Tim Berne and his trio (also with color-conscious drummer Gerald Cleaver). Berne, who actually went to

Portland's Lewis & Clark College and discovered his musical obsession there, remains one of those Americans too little appreciated in America (*Europe gets it*). His set was a thing of awe, as abstraction yielded to tight, spidery melodic inventions appearing as if out of the fog at the end of tunes.

Wisely, all was not leaning toward the outside in the festival. The Classical Jazz Quartet headlined Saturday night, making a tidy sound with its Modern Jazz Quartet-revisited format and stellar, polished players (Ron Carter, Kenny Barron, Lewis Nash and the great young vibist Stefon Harris, whose role in both this group and the SFJAZZ Collective made him something of a prize figure around town). This quartet has something special in its bones, but can also irritate those of us who find the "swinging the classics" notion suspect, or at least fiendishly difficult to make work. Bach and Rachmaninoff were morphed uncomfortably into jazz settings here, but the best stuff was purely original and absolutely musical: Carter's oblique blues tune "Nearly" was hypnotic and Harris' beautiful "Epilogue for Milt" was a poignant and inventive paean to his hero Milt Jackson.

Speaking of musicians at the top of their instrumental category, the understated piano master Bill Charlap closed out the weekend with his decade-old trio, in empathetic cahoots with drummer Peter Washington and bassist Kenny Washington. Is there another pianist on the scene with such a cool command of "standard" repertoire, giving traditional jazz a better name? Maybe not.

Inevitably, in a weekend stocked with outsters Ornette, Cecil, Berne and Melford, the dialectic between experimentation and convention became a magnetic force around Portland. Some of the impressive music on opening weekend clung solidly to a middle ground, infused with ideas and energies from jazz camps of both tradition and sedition. On Saturday afternoon, the Bad Plus drew an enthusiastic bunch—including the all-important "underage" crowd—to the Crystal Ballroom, a magical third-story venue by the river where the Grateful Dead used to play semi-secret shows for many years.

Royston playfully dubbed this dynamic, humor-lined and genre-fusing variation on the jazz piano trio as the "shape of jazz to come," and it was more than idle lip service. The trio has cooked up a compelling new sound, between Ethan Iverson's broad piano vocabulary (with no fear of irony and moments of octave-y camp), Dave King's powerhouse yet subtle drumming and Reid Anderson's spot-on bass playing and fascinating way with songwriting (i.e., "Big Eater" and the brainily metalloid "Physical Cities"). For covers, their set included David Bowie's "Life on Mars"—veering from anarchy to glam-rock pomp—and an encore of Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," reenergized with Bad Plus spirit.

And the SFJAZZ Collective opened its current season and tour in Portland, with a great set showcasing a group that has notched up to a whole 'nother level of focused artistry. Now with Joe Lovano, Dave Douglas and vibe king Harris in the ranks, the band combines its all-star status more artfully than before. This season's theme is the music of Wayne Shorter, whose tunes are arranged by band members, who also are commissioned to write new pieces, customized for this ensemble. The Collective is a proud product of the San Francisco Jazz Festival, a source of ideas in Royston's festival—along with festivals like those in Vancouver and Montreal.

Whatever the sources of its concept and robustness, the Portland Jazz Festival is doing several things very right. With any luck, we can count PDX among the shape of jazz festivals to come.