

JazzTimes

Barbados Jazz Festival

Venue/ Various Locations
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In some real sense, the art of maintaining and growing a jazz festival has to do with the ongoing calibration of site and sound. No one can say that the site is less than remarkable in the case of the Barbados Jazz Festival, which celebrated its 12th annual festival this year from January 10 to 16. This inspiring island, the most easterly of the Caribbean islands and one of the most soulful in the region, has jazz spirit written all over it.

The musical element and philosophy of the festival is still under construction, but the festival, founded and guided by the charismatic director Gilbert Rowe, is doing something very right in the process of balancing artistic and commercial factors. In the past, the festival has been criticized for deigning to include smooth jazz and R&B or other nonjazz acts. Cooler heads must prevail, though, and recognize that there's a way to satisfy an array of customers (and potential customers).

This year, for instance, the big show -- and surefire sellout -- was Alicia Keys, in her Barbados debut, at the island's largest venue, Garfield Sobers Auditorium. Keys, ironically, has had more jazz elements in the past than in what she unveiled in her steamy but far too-short set. Playing for an hour and change brought to mind casino aesthetics. Adding to the Keys problem was her burly bodyguard, whose aggressive stance, repeatedly shown on local TV and newspapers, seemed to insult the gentle spirit of the Bajans, leaving a bad taste in the collective mouth.

After the Keys set, many festival-goers wound up packing the club known as Time Out, in the hip area known as the Gap. There, it was a refreshing pleasure to hear the hoary jazz sounds of "Donna Lee" and "Green Dolphin Street," as played with fire and intelligence by the young Cuban quintet Joven Soul. Trumpeter Alejandro Delgado was especially impressive, fluid with his ideas and execution.

Over in the real jazz category of the festival program, the star of the fest was Jason Moran (pictured), although he wasn't positioned as a main attraction. Moran was the opener on a bill at the Sherbourne Convention Center with Ellis Marsalis, who put in a fine mainstream set with

his quartet, featuring son Jason on drums. Moran -- who briefly studied with Marsalis, as a youngster -- demonstrated his uncanny, organic way of mediating influences lifted from jazz' noble history and the impulses naturally felt by someone alive and attentive to contemporary culture. Echoes of Monk, Ellingtonia, stride, hip-hop and the "out" sides of players like Andrew Hill and Don Pullen wove through his set, through to the simmering groove of his closer "Planet Rock." This guy is onto something big, something new, something old.

On the first of two days in the Jazz on the Hill weekend program up in the idyllic compound on Farley Hill, the logical focus was on fresh purveyors of Latin jazz. Between the steamy goods of Puerto Rican Tito de Gracia's band and the all-star intensity of Charles Flores' band of Cubans (and Cuban expatriates), a logical bond was created between jazz the expanded island region.

Hot and admirably tight salsa and Latin-Jazz is at the core of the Tito de Gracia sound, its three-horn section bouncing gymnastically around such boppish themes as "Billie's Bounce" when not grounded in more specifically salsa-related soil.

Pieces of a Dream closed the long afternoon anti-climactically, spewing a glib happy jazz that was too smooth for comfort. Theirs is music which, when folded into a jazz festival context, raises the nagging question of whether smooth sounds belong in a real jazz festival at all. It may be best for smooth jazz to exist in a separate, quarantined culture all its own. That said, the players were obviously gifted, even if the setting gave them little chance to exercise musicality.

Speaking of inspiring sites, Farley Hill is one of the more inviting spaces imaginable. A rambling park, surrounded by sugar cane fields and a stunning panoramic view of the lush hills and distant Atlantic sea, the park is built around the ruins of an old sugar plantation.

A crafts area featured handmade and carved and painted works. When the Barbados national anthem came on over the P.A. around noon, every Bajan froze respectfully, creating an odd vision of suspended animation. This is a young country, independent from three centuries as a British colony only in 1966, and the sense of dynamism and pride is palpable.

The highlight of this day's music came from the hyper nimble and tasteful bassist Flores' band, featuring the celebrated percussive forces of drummer Horacio "El Negro" Hernandez and mighty *conguero* Giovanni Hidalgo.

Their set closed with an orgasmic tag section to their closing tune, with Hidalgo on timbales amidst the band's driving rhythmic fervor. The band feverishly worked a repetitive motif and then pianist Elio Villafranca slyly inserted a woozy polyrhythmic counter line, making for what were undoubtedly the finest 32 measures of the festival.

Up on Farley Hill, everything seemed right with the world, for a minute.