

JazzTimes

Vitoria-Gasteiz and San Sebastian Jazz Festivals

Venue/ San Sebastian, Donostia Spain

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A trip to the Basque country in the last half of July confirms at least three self-evident truths. 1) In the annual scheme of European jazz festivals, the back-to-back festivals in Vitoria-Gasteiz and San Sebastian make this a small region rich in notable jazz for two weeks of the year. 2) The Basque country-aka Euskal Herria, in the ancient native Basque tongue-is one of those undeniably beautiful corners of the world, recently enhanced by the arrival of architect Frank O. Gehry's wild yet elegant beautiful senses-altering Guggenheim museum, which has effectively put Bilbao on the map of architectural wonders. 3) There is unrest brewing here, resulting from a long, complex struggle for Basque autonomy, which led to the formation of the terrorist group ETA during the tail end of Franco's notoriously repressive regime.

Drive an hour outside of San Sebastian, winding amidst the lush green terrain, and you arrive at the spiritual center of Euskal Herria, Gernika. It was here in 1937 that Franco unleashed a notorious Basque-targeted bombing raid, with arsenal borrowed from Hitler. Picasso's epic painting "Guernica" immortalized the event in a powerful antiwar statement.

Yes, but what does this have to do with the business of swing? Culture and tourism don't exist in a vacuum. That much a full crowd in the Plaza de la Trinidad in San Sebastian learned first-hand, when, after the easy-going Quartet West set, two masked ETA sympathizers appeared on a roof, firing off flares and spraying the crowd with leaflets calling for a general strike the next day. Sure enough, the normally tourist-choked old town area was a ghost town the next day-even the McDonald's was closed (a sure sign of something heavy afoot). The ETA was not a silent partner during jazz fest season: there were two assassinations, a bombing (without harm) in Vitoria-Gasteiz just days after the festival ended, and a death of a young woman working with ETA. Her face quickly appeared everywhere, on Xeroxed memorials, and she became something of an instant martyr, despite her being also a would-be murderer.

Afterward, Joe Zawinul-with one of his hottest versions of his Zawinul Syndicate yet-put in a feverishly good set, and in the rain. The fascinating Portuguese vocalist Maria Joao periodically joined in, with her ecstatic ornamentations adding organically to the Zawinul mix. At the end, Zawinul, ever the avuncular Godfather figure, bid the locals "all the best for the future. We've all got problems, and we're gonna solve them all." His principle weapon is a potent,

multicultural groove.

All of these elements converged-in concert, if you will-as part of the overall gestalt of the fest experience. Jazz festivals don't have to be, and shouldn't be, supermarkets, efficient and predictable displays of product without regard for the hosting city.

At the Kronos Quartet concert in San Sebastian, they served up an adventurous set of pieces from around the world, including music by Mexico's late iconoclast Silvestre Revueltas and Steve Reich's ruggedly hypnotic "Triple Quartet." Late in the concert, a heckler disrupted the silence with something in Euskara, and then in English: "It is a little bit lite. We are in the middle of the shit out there." Trouble was brewing in the streets that night, with riot police on guard.

The doomsday heckler had it wrong. Of course, the Kronos concert was not lite, which they immediately proved after the heckle, by playing Michael Gordon's intense, avant-grunge piece "Potassium." If anything, they were the most adventurous act on the festival schedule, and a bold extension of the programming. While festivals too often reach beyond jazz, proper, to include rock and blues shows in the lineup (as a means of padding coffers and luring jazz-skeptical crowds), San Sebastian's artistic director, Miguel Martin, has often leaned the opposite direction. Last year, Uri Caine appeared here for several days, presenting his jazz-cum-classical treatments of Bach, Schumann, among other contexts. The Kronos appearance fit the bill perfectly, harking back to a time when the new music world and jazz were nearly bedfellows.

At 36, the festival in Donostia-San Sebastian (Donostia is the Basque name for this seaside resort town) is one of the oldest and one of the best of the European crop. Which doesn't mean there weren't slow spots in the five-day program. Ray Brown, honored here for his 75th birthday, put in a set of standards that never rose above a mainstream pleasantry, brightened by Hank Jones' intelligent soloing and dulled by James Morrison's showboating tendencies on both trumpet and trombone. The set seemed oddly rote, especially coming after the thoughtful music-making of a reunion of Gato Barbieri and trumpeter Enrico Rava, with whom Barbieri played in the '60s: the saxist's bleeding edge, saw-toothed timbre nicely complemented Rava's searching phrases and round-toned lyricism.

Deeper stuff was to be found in a long, probing and rapturous set by Ahmad Jamal, in inspired collusion with drummer Idris Muhammad and bassist James Cammack. Jamal guided his trio over a landscape of varied dynamics and flexible, mobilelike song structures; it was not music about head-solo-head, but rather a creative experiment with emotionality intact.

Another festival high point was an introspective evening from the Spanish David Mengual Mosaic, in a trio and a nonet led by the bassist, replete with Antonio Serrano's pliant chromatic harmonica. An intriguing Spanish-cum-Latin American thread governed the evening, "Las Estrellas de la Calle 54," running from the jazz-fueled flamenco of Chano Dominguez Sextet and the cerebral spiciness of Jerry Gonzalez y Los Piratas Flamencos, into the Cuban heat of Bebo Valdés and Patato. Rhythm flowed, furiously, exactly.

Perhaps the most impressive concert of the festival was also its softest, when Pat Metheny and

Charlie Haden did one of their rare duet concerts. It has to be said that an uncredited third partner here was the concert hall itself-the 1,800 seat, acoustically luminous theater of the Kursaal, opened only two years ago. Spanish architect Rafael Moneo's startling structure, basically two translucent, sea green cubes slightly tilted, is a contemporary landmark (worthy of an architectural pilgrimage, along with the Guggenheim). It's set, literally and symbolically, between the water and the more traditional architecture across the boulevard.

The acoustic instrument-wielding Metheny and Haden, likewise, bridged the traditions of jazz, folk and pop in their material, while injecting contemporary attitude identifiably their own.

2001 was a big year for Vitoria-Gasteiz, held in the capital of the region. Having reached a ripe, milestone age of 25, they celebrated by bringing Wynton Marsalis to town, with both the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra and in an intimate duet with his father, Ellis. Wynton was also commissioned to write a piece for the occasion.

The best sets of the fest came from tenor players of note, in complementary settings: Joe Lovano's Nonet is a compact, little big band that covers that contrasts, on more than one level, the stolid infrastructure and musical heft of the Lincoln Center band. Lovano himself seemed even more inspired than usual, shifting from mainstream to avant, from gymnastic precision to expressionistic smears, with unusual grace.

And then there was Wayne Shorter, jazz's great elusive icon, whose current quartet-bassist John Patitucci, pianist Danilo Perez, and drummer Brian Blade-come closer than any of Shorter's post-Weather Report groups in capturing the fragile poetry of Shorter's music. These musicians seem to have intuited that Shorter is, at root, a mysterious traveler of a leader, guiding his band through open, searching passages, landing at his structural signposts with a gentle sense of surprise rather than a smug bang.

After hours, hordes gathered in the headquarter NH Hotel to catch sets by Cyrus Chestnut and the fascinating matching of organist Larry Goldings, guitarist Peter Bernstein and drummer Bill Stewart-a meeting of prime players on their respective instruments, who have neatly and unexpectedly expanded the paradigm of the of organ trio.

The festival's newcomer revelation came from young Swedish pianist Esbjorn Svensson's EST Trio. With its articulate use of space, dynamics and exploratory ideas, EST is a group to watch for. They ended with a pores-opening version of "I Mean You" with a whole new attitude, something Scandinavian, perhaps, and something fresh.

There were low points, too. Kyle Eastwood, though an interesting musician and a work-in-progress, doesn't quite seem ready for prime time. Bassist Richard Bona is a wonderful musician who bends over backwards to please and amuse an audience, at the expense of his own artistry. Marcus Miller, one of the few electric bassist leaders making good music on the scene these days, straddled creativity and empty groove-machinery. He seemed especially out of context following Shorter's sensitive acoustic quartet, and made a sly nod to Shorter with his version of the Jaco Pastorius "Teen Town (Jaco's spirit prevails: the best tune in Bona's set was his smart arrangement of Pastorius' "Liberty City").

In a festival otherwise mostly focused on musical winds blowing over from the U.S., varied Spanish colors conspired on the final night, courtesy of Spanish-flavored fireworks of the New Chick Corea Trio, and reigning flamenco sensation Paco de Lucia. Corea's natural integration of flamenco, a surrogate for the blues influence implicit in most jazz musicians, took on a deeper resonance here, especially in combination with de Lucia's set. De Lucia put in a rhythmically riveting performance, on instruments, and virtuosic use of clapping hands and blissfully dancing feet (dancer Joaquin Grillo stole the show more than once).

When the two groups conjoined at the end of the concert, with a de rigueur run through Corea's classic "Spain," civil and cultural unrest was the farthest thing from anyone's mind. The only explosions were well-timed ones emanating from the multiple percussion instruments onstage. Music may be still be the ultimate, culture-crossing peacekeeper.