

# MONTREAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

VARIOUS SITES/MONTREAL

ne burden faced by the Montreal Jazz Festival in this, its 10th year, was living up to its own good press. For the past several years, the word on the Montreal fest has been that it sets a sterling example of how to program and organize a jazz festival. It

has often been lauded as the best jazz festival on the continent (and the world?), and as a paradigm, putting stateside contenders to shame.

Going strictly by numbers, the apex of the festival was a free concert by The Pat Metheny Group, playing its palatable, increasingly Brazilian-tinged fusion to an estimated 115,000 on the closed-off McGill Avenue. The phenomenon—a cooperative crush of humanity—was as much a part of the show's success as the sounds. Metheny went from sprawling to intimate, from breezy to intense, the next night, when he played with his old pals Charlie Haden and Jack DeJohnette—whose venturesome nine-minute solo in the midst of the tune "The Calling" stole the show. That night, Haden himself played tentatively, whereas the bassist seemed entirely in the moment during concerts with Al Foster and Joe Henderson (who put in the best, quirkiest version of the fest with the inevitable standard "Round Midnight"), with Geri Allen and Paul Motian, and especially at the final, climactic concert



Charlie Haden

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with his Liberation Music Orchestra, East Coast version (except for Coloradan tenorist Ernie Watts). The heated improvisational round-robin of the Orchestra concert was truly thrilling, with special kudos to trombonist Ray Anderson, tenorist Joe Lovano, and trumpeter Tom Harrell (whose solos were the shortest and among the most vivid of the evening).

In addition to Haden's residency, it was a fine year for stringed instruments in Montreal, particularly as regards great white hopes of the electric guitar. It was invigorating to see the anti-histrionic guitarist Bill Frisell coming out of the closet (and out of New York) as a leader of his organically eclectic quartet. John Scofield, who has been getting back to straightahead roots lately, played on the same bill, in a trio setting that left him room to display his improvisational muscle in a way reminiscent of his old Enja albums. Later that evening, Frisell and Scofield held a session of their mutual admiration

society in an all-too-rare meeting of Bass Desires. Founder/bassist Marc Johnson and drummer Peter Erskine (who also appeared with his own band) rose to the occasion—certainly a festival highlight.

Other plectrist notes: John McLaughlin, now on acoustic guitar, found in percussionist Trilok Gurtu a expert foil for his ongoing East-West fusion lab tests. David Torn concertized with only his axe and his racks, and arrived at a few spontaneous revelations—notably his transcendent, Middle-Eastern-like encore. And Brandon Ross, one of the most promising young guitarists, neatly wove his way into the imaginative electro-acoustic fabric of Craig Harris' Tailgaters' Tails.

In the comeback department, saxist Charles Lloyd performed small wonders within the ensemble chemistry of his new European rhythm section: drummer Jon Christensen, bassist Palle Danielsson, and the conceptually fertile pianist Bobo Stenson. The Nordic players provide a complementary edge to Lloyd's music, splitting the difference between his wailing, hard-bop instincts and his meditative leanings.

As with Metheny's grand outdoor show, the consummate tenor player Sonny Rollins provided a near-perfect balance between

feel-good crowd pleasing and musical considerations. It's a testament to Rollins mastery that he keeps customers satisfied and delivers boldly engaging solos, as on the lazy turf of "Tennessee Waltz," or his own bright-eyed calypsos.

Among pianists, Montreal son Oscar Peterson stoked hometown pride with his first show here in five years. Chick Corea's precision-gear Akoustic trio proved a fascinating machine to observe in action, all athletic gyrations and chiseled emotional contours. Michel Petrucciani served up his typically masterfully mainstream brew while Richie Beirach (in duet with Dave Liebman) freely mixed his classical and jazz metaphors. Paul Bley went home again in more than one way: the Montreal native played with Haden (along with Paul Motian) for the first time since the two parted ways in Los Angeles in 1959. This trio was made to be: like Haden and Motian, Bley relishes open spaces and gray zones, and he took everything but the expected route.

Jazz festivals are a fine place to check up on the continuing saga of the Marsalis family. Sire Ellis is to be revered for his past and progeny, but his set of pleasantries opening for Wynton left something to be desired. Wynton, circa 1989, remains enig-



Oscar Peterson

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matic, an artist struggling to decide what to do with his imposing genius. Of late, Wynton has compressed the dynamic level to an elegant whisper (even his "Black Codes" has been tamed and smoothed-out) and he has hearkened to new historical models—New Orleans orthodoxy and Louis Armstrong. One major distinction between the old/new Wynton is the "Tain" factor, as illustrated the next night. Then, brother Branford played a feisty set with Wynton's former drum fireball, Jeff "Tain" Watts, and pianist Kenny Kirkland, lacking Wynton's conceptual rigor but gaining in sheer blowing power. Sting has not taken the sting out of Branford or Kirkland.

In short, Montreal's 10th festival, if not the most daring of musical menus, proved to be nearly everything you want in a jazz festival, in plentiful supply. It was relatively encyclopedic, without dogmatic eccentricities or pop-pap sellouts. The staging was exemplary, and the musicians were treated right. And the trains ran on time.

—josef woodard