



John Scofield
A Moment's Peace

**NOUVEL ALBUM
DÉJÀ DISPONIBLE**

Avec Larry Goldings,
Scott Colley et Brian Blade.

EN CONCERT
le 12 juillet à Vienne
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Roughly halfway through this summer's Montreal Jazz Festival, a ripe, internally-referential moment occurred in the festival's Salle de Presse. It was a Monday morning press happening, an occasion for jazz VIP Bruce Lundvall to present the festival's annual "Bruce Lundvall Award" to another veteran jazz VIP, George Wein. Also at the table were Montreal fest founders André Menard and Alain Simard, and they were obviously happy to be in the presence of Wein, whose work in building up the jazz festival scene, starting more than a half century ago with his own, still-running Newport Jazz Festival, counted for much.

And it was more than just polite lip service when Wein told the Montreal fest architects that theirs is the finest in the world by now. In its 33rd year, the Montreal Jazz Festival remains a kind of grand role model of how to run a strong, well-organized, smartly-programmed, not overly compromising festival. One

key is the site and setting, in Montreal's gradually expanding and improving Place des Arts, with its multiple indoor venues, in walking distance, and outdoor stages – with more big, groove-lined and populist fare - for the huddling and masses. On the larger platforms of geography and calendar, the Montreal festival is ideally perched, tapping into jazz artists from both down in New York over from Europe, and at a juncture on the festival circuit when many of the acts headed to the Euro-festival circuit can start the party here. In 2011, during my four day stay, the Montreal Jazz Festival had its share of "big shows" to lure folks in. Diana Krall did a special two-night stint in solo mode (at a festival where, a dozen years ago, she was doing a five-night stand of her Nat King Cole tribute, in a small theater up the street). Prince put on the glitz, as he did elsewhere on the jazz fest circuit across Europe, and Chick Corea's Return to Forever nostalgia act – abetted by fusioneer fiddler Jean-Luc Ponty and with guitarist Frank Gambale replacing Al DiMeola – pretended that fusion wasn't an oldie act.

In the same theater as the Corea fusion event, Brazilian eminence grise-in-training, 68-year-old Milton Nascimento's set was emotionally moving, moving through material from his classic Native Dancer on backward and forward.

But for this listener, at least, the real and deeper pleasures occur in smaller rooms, such as the late night soirees in the Gesu – Centre de Creativite. Here, on opening night, the great and still-evolving pianist Brad Mehldau gave one of his classic solo piano shows, turning familiar songs like "My Favorite Things," Nirvana's "Lithium" and the Beatles' "Hey Jude" into malleable vehicles for his spontaneous and sometimes highly adventurous pianistic inventions. Of late, Mehldau has been pluming the sonorous possibilities of the grand piano, as a source of rumbling tremolo waves more than the conventional jazz approach – although he can burn and blow with the best of 'em, when he wants to.

Also heard in the Gesu center were the formidable and fresh-idea-blessed Anat Cohen's fine group, featuring the pianist-deserving-wider-recognition Bruce Barth (we do wish Cohen would play more clarinet than sax, given the paucity of good clarinetists and over-abundance of good saxists on the scene). Earlier that night, George Wein himself, as pianist, brought in an all-star group, with no less starring players than Lew Tabackin, Randy Brecker and guitarist Howard Alden (who also sat in, nicely, with Anat Cohen) for a pleasing mainstream blowing session.

Pianist Geri Allen, who has also put in many a strong show up in Montreal over the decades, fared impressively with her quartet Timeline (including tap dancer Maurice Chestnut) in this room, moving seamlessly through odd time signatures and song structures and concepts less-travelled.

Another festival pinnacle came with the wowing set, also at the Gesu, by the wondrous, light-on-its-feet yet substantial Fly – tenor saxist Mark Turner, bassist Larry Grenadier, and drummer Jeff Ballard, all excellent players and sensitive ensemble teammates. Fly, as evidence here, is really about the finest chordless trio making the jazz scene at present.

Sadly, one anticipated artist missing from this year's program was the great alto saxist Lee Konitz, who suffered health issues requiring him to be holed up in an Australian hospital. Konitz, whose intelligent and ever-questioning approach to his post-cool jazz aesthetics have made him a logical regular at this festival over the years, was slated to play with pianist partner Dan Tepfer in the wonderful nightclub venue of the intimate club called Upstairs (actually a half-downstairs room).

As a replacement, Tepfer called on bassist Gary Peacock, for a setting which inevitably conjured up comparison and contrast notes with Peacock's "main" gig, with Keith Jarrett, as well as Peacock's long association with Paul Bley. But Tepfer, a bright and cerebral piano star on the horizon, is really a young player to watch out for, who established a strong, flexible rapport with Peacock. Here, the bassist seemed more restless and less inclined to simply play the support role he does with Jarrett. On the next night in the Upstairs room – one of those spaces a jazz fan just wants to hang out in, even if the festival programming is tugging on one's sleeve - the ever-versatile pianist Kenny Werner gave a fine example of his powers in solo piano mode, at its best in exploratory piano poet mode.

There was more piano finery, and piano-bass interactivity, to behold when another Kenny, Kenny Barron, joined Dave Holland for a deceptively casual duo concert. The pair have something special going together, in a very different way than the old pairing of Barron and minimalist bassist Charlie Haden. On this night, they did poetic justice to standards and Barron originals including the fittingly-titled harmonic looping etude "Spiral."

Where the Montreal program falls short, and has been moreso in the last few years, is in its more left-leaning, avant-garde programming niche. As it happened, though, some avant-garde inklings bubbled up to the surface in the course of the three-concert "Invitational" series, this year featuring Marc Ribot in the festival's first half (the other invitational concerts mini-series slots went to Dave Holland and Anouar Brahem). Guitarist and project-maker Ribot is a fascinating and viscerally powerful enigma, one of those impossible-to-pigonehole musicians who has worked with everyone from John Zorn to Elvis Costello and T-Bone Burnett circles, and recently, in a project with Bill Frisell. But his own densely-packed history of solo projects and band family tree is something else, again.

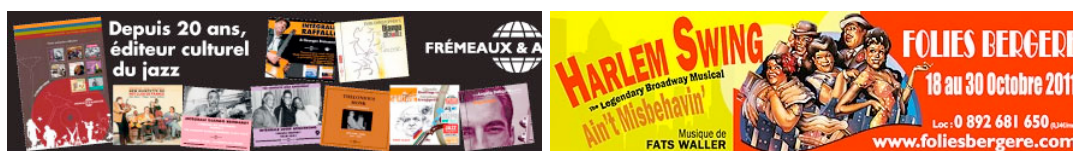
As a leader in Montreal this summer, he seized the reins of three very different projects on consecutive nights in the Theatre Jean-Duceppe. Ceramic Dog is a feisty mutant rock-jazz-free trio, with bassist Shahzad Ismaily and surging drummer Ches Smith, which swerves around elements of punk energy and odd-meter progressivisms in its wake. The next night, he was at the helm of an older and more purely joyful project, Marc Ribot y Los Cubanitos Postizos, which gives the guitarist a chance to roll in Cuban grooves.

But the finale of his three-night Ribot stint was the most provocative : the septet called Caged Funk, led collaboratively with guitarist Marco Cappelli, pays various respects, and mostly to great American composer/thinker John Cage, but with plenty of post-'70s-Miles voodoo jazz-funk grooves and other stylistic detours along the way. A particularly haunting beauty emerged at the end of the set, proper, as Ribot leaned on a warmly distorted guitar tone and seeping volume swells, laying out the quixotic patterns of a piece Cage called "Some of the Harmony of Maine."

Somehow, the disparate threads of musical impulse come together in a way that works, and on this night at the festival, it whetted the appetite for hearing further such adventures. Maybe at another Montreal rendezvous ?

Returning to Montreal each early summer is one of those reassuring events in the jazz universe, restoring faith and pricking up curiosity about what's happening in a given jazz year.

Josef Woodard / Photo Kenny Barron-Dave Holland ©Denis Alix by courtesy of FIJMontréal



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