

Aspen, Colorado (Etats-Unis)

Jazz Aspen Snowmass, June, 2003

In most jazz festivals, no matter how large or dense, one or two events emerge from the mass of stimulation and linger in the mind after the rest has become a blur. At the tenth annual edition of Jazz Aspen Snowmass, held in the beautiful Rocky Mountain town in June, the highlight came about almost by accident. Brad Mehldau had been booked with his trio, but that fell through due to money and logistics, so the pianist did a solo set in the historic Jerome Hotel (having reached the ripe old age of 100 qualifies a hotel in western United States as «historic»).

However brilliant a musician, Mehldau can be a moody presence onstage, but for this, his debut in Aspen, he was warm and accommodating, opening with an adventurous version of «From this Moment On.» In a Mehldau Moment, he liberated his left hand, alluding to the melody and taking intriguing detours. In this thrilling set, the song selection ranged from Monk to enigmatic pop singer Nick Drake to Paul Simon's «50 Ways to Lose Your Lover» to Nina Simone's «Lilac Wine,» a plaintive tribute to the late singer. Throughout, the pianist was loose in all the right ways, exploring tangents but respecting the host material and the host audience in a way which gripped the room in the atmosphere of magical music-making.

The festival known as Jazz Aspen Snowmass has a complicated history, lined with ambitious ideals. It has a strong French connection in that founding director Jim Horowitz looked to the model of the legendary Marciac Festival in designing its program. Marciac remains a kind of sister city and a sister festival. The idea was to center operations in a remote, desirable small town, with a central tent and peripheral shows in the city itself.

In the beginning, the festival took place in the same venues where Aspen's acclaimed summer classical educational and festival programs take place, a short-lived honeymoon between the organizations. For several years, the festival's main events have been based in the nearby village of Snowmass for several years, 2003 marked the return to Aspen itself, with a large concert tent, and surrounding festival compound, just on the edge of town. After hours shows kept the music flowing.

There wasn't much real jazz to be found in the main tent, unfortunately. The rhythmically fiery Chico O'Farrill Afro-Cuban Jazz Band kicked things off promisingly in opening night. The next night, Tony Bennett lived up to expectations, with a set that dazzled an audience cutting across age and style groups. Bennett remains the definition of timeless grace, easily crossing the line between pop and jazz expression.

The crossover aspect was more strained, but surprisingly interesting, in the case of pop singer Boz Scaggs, who recently released an album of standards sung in his understated style. He wisely employed jazz-fluent musicians for the occasion, compensating for his fledgling jazz chops. Others in the tent included R&B singer India.Aie-originally from nearby Denver-veteran blues-pop singer Joe Cocker, and the young, plain old blues singer Shemekiah Copeland, daughter of the late blues legend Johnny Copeland.

Pianist-singer Patricia Barber isn't to everyone's taste. Her late night set in the Jerome Hotel contained the usual droll patter and self-conscious intellectualism. On the subject of singers, one of the most potent performers on this year's bill was the underrated jazz singer Tierney Sutton, met with strange fates in her appearances. First, an outdoor show in downtown Aspen was cut short by a surprise rain, and then an appearance in the small restaurant whose design allowed for excessive noise from the bar area. Sutton deserves better.

Despite the distractions, Sutton showed why she's one of the finest and also more inventively interpretive jazz singers on the scene. She easily floated her expressive voice over a pedal tone-ish version of «I've Grown Accustomed to Your Face,» a 7/4 take on «Fly Me to the Moon,» and a challenging version of «Where or When.» She conquered adversity, handily.

June's weekend-long festival is just part of the larger organization, also including a more educational workshop/festival in July and a more purely pop-oriented festival in September, which helps pay the bills. All in all, Jazz Aspen Snowmass has managed to survive, whereas many American jazz festivals have failed to make ends meet, without sacrificing musical integrity. After milestone, the Aspen festival is a force to reckon with.

Josef Woodard