

Montreal Jazz Festival

MONTREAL, CANADA

In an event as comprehensive and increasingly important as the Montreal Jazz Festival, it becomes a challenge to isolate definitive moments, notable trees within the mighty forest. One such moment in the 1997 edition may have been the reading—revision, more like—of the Gershwin anthem “Summertime” by French pianist Martial Solal. Solal, one of this music’s most underrated, thinking-person’s pianists, casually deconstructed the tune and sprinkled stunning phrases over its reconstituted form, egged on by able trio-mates, drummer Paul Motian and an especially antsy Gary Peacock on bass.

Other crystalline moments from the ten-day event, oddly enough, may have occurred during the after-hours jam sessions in the bar of the festival’s main hotel. There was pianist Kenny Werner, who had just played with Joe Lovano’s Sinatra tribute band, turning out expressionistic profundity on the theme of “Softly, As In a Morning Sunrise;” great young pianist Brad Mehldau sculpting a poetic cadenza on “I Fall In Love Too Easily;” or George Benson, flailing artfully on guitar and then via scatting, on “Cherokee,” the prodigal pop-jazz son coming home for a minute.

Montreal is, culturally and geographically, a junction point between Europe and America, so it was no accident that some of the strongest music this year came from Europe. To the point: the Vienna Art Orchestra, celebrating its 20th anniversary and closing out its North American tour (only in Canada), handily stole the show. Bandleader/arranger Matthias Rugg leads a fascinating, irreverent-by-way-of-reverence big band, stocked with bold soloists and remarkably taut ensemble work, not to mention Ursula Dudziak’s disarming vocal prowess. This music is gymnastic,



DENIS ALIX

Clockwise from top: Danish Radio Orchestra, Bill Frisell, and Martial Solal

ironic, and substantial.

Other Europeans of note: the Danish Radio Jazz Orchestra, led by Bob Brookmeyer, and French accordion wizard Richard Galliano, performing a solo version of Jaco Pastorius’ “Three Views of a Secret” that was to die, and to cry, for. Bandoneon player Dino Saluzzi, Argentinian who “made it” in Europe, worked

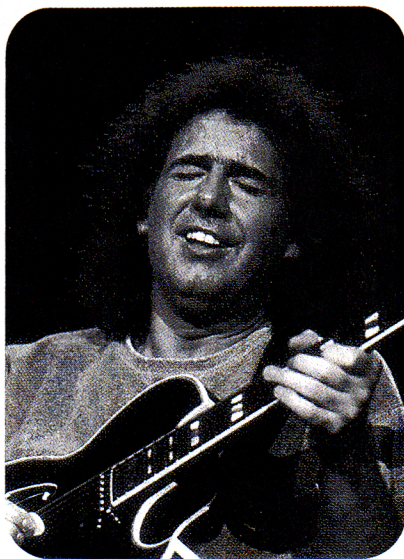
up an enigmatic beauty, and Enrico Rava brought a little big band to play the “Carmen” suite. While the Montreal festival programming goes light on “outside” elements in jazz, it did host veteran Dutch improviser, pianist Fred Van Hove, and the garage rock/M-Base band Aka Moon, from Belgium.

On the opening night, trombonist Ray



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Anderson—who, along with guitarist Bill Frisell, was featured in multiple concerts as part of the admirable “invitational” series—appeared both with an American trio, with drummer Gerry Hemingway and bassist Mark Dresser, and a Euro-trio, with drummer Han Bennik and guitarist Christy Doran. Anderson’s five-concert series also featured



Pat Metheny

the bone orgy of Slide Ride, in which George Lewis, Craig Harris, Gary Valente and Anderson artfully exploited this great instrument's capacity for sonorous beauty and harebrained antics.

Joining Frisell's unusual yet internally logical quartet were the guitarist' former bandmate and soulmate Joey Baron, Seattle-based friends Wayne Horvitz and Robin Holcomb, and the luminous alto saxist Lee Konitz, (whose own trio concert, with Mehldau and bassist Charlie Haden, was another festival standout).

Pat Metheny has long been one of the favorite sons of this festival, and his role this year was both prominent and a bit clandestine. On the official schedule, his only appearance was as part of the all-star Michael Brecker group, and a scheduled concert with out-guitar icon Derek Bailey, which was cancelled due to the Brit's illness.

But Metheny also snuck in for a three-night stand in a club far from the central festival zone, with Roy Haynes and bassist Marc Johnson—a ripe and righteous trio. Metheny also teamed up with Haden, another Montreal regular, for a rare duo concert, also off to the side of the official schedule. Playing tunes from their recent duet album, the pair demonstrated their deep rapport in an unplugged setting, followed by the North American premiere of the concerto written for Haden by composer Gavin Bryars, a fascinatingly cool, obliquely sentimental work.

The Montreal Festival keeps getting saddled with the accolade as “the best jazz festival in the world.” This year, as before, it was hard to argue with the superlative, once in the embrace of its generous celebration of the art form, from both sides of the Atlantic.

—Josef Woodard

Matosinhos Jazz Festival

Oporto, Portugal

Jetlagged scriblings on the initial Matosinhos Jazz Festival, named for and presented this June in a nearby suburb of Oporto, Portugal's second city but its trade and industrial center, about 300 kilometers north of Lisbon, overlooking both the Atlantic and the Rio Douro:

Unlike most European festivals, Matosinhos was no grab bag. All of the headliners were pianists. Abdullah Ibrahim performed solo. Paul Bley captained an all-star trio with drummer Al Foster and bassist George Mraz (Tommy Flanagan's teammates not so long ago). Geri Allen co-led a quartet with her husband, trumpeter Wallace Roney (Buster Williams was on bass, and Lenny White on drums). Muhal Richard Abrams brought a sextet featuring trumpeter Jack Walrath, trombonist Clark Gaton, tenor saxophonist Patience Higgins, bassist Brad Jones and drummer Reggie Nicholson. Representing the locals was Mário Laginha, a talented young pianist whom few Americans have ever heard of, though he is quite well-known in Portugal as the music director for the neo-traditional pop singer Maria João.

Not counting Abrams' two solid hours of abstract hully gully on closing night, my favorite moment of the festival occurred as I stood waiting outside a restaurant at dusk with a bunch of Portuguese journalists for the van that would take us to that night's show. Raul Vaz Bernardo, a retired banker deeply in love with his record collection who now reviews jazz for *Expresso*, a Lisbon-based weekly, began to sing “Close Your Eyes” in syncopated English, with as much gusto as he had shown talking about obscure sides by

Gary McFarland and Eddie Costa over dinner. Apparently used to his exuberance, his fellow jazz critics paid him no mind. But I laughed aloud, in surprise and delight, as did Ana Bela Martins da Cruz, a cultural reporter for the Lisbon daily *Diário de Notícias*, especially when Raul forgot the words to the bridge and resorted to whistling.

Before my departure, an American colleague asked me why—beyond the obvious incentive of an all-expenses-paid trip to the birthplace of port wine—I was so keen on crossing the ocean to hear musicians I might easily hear in New York, a lot closer to home. The question had been nagging at me, and Raul's spontaneous serenade went a long way toward answering it. I wanted to hear jazz as part of a European audience, to hear how its meaning changed depending on who was listening to it (a perverse desire, perhaps, in light of the ongoing dispute over the extent of European content in jazz, and over the desirability of such content.) Matosinhos was the perfect festival for me; by virtue of being so new, it's not yet on the international jazz vagabond's map. Except for the musicians and their retinues, I seemed to be the only foreigner in attendance.

One way in which Europe is no different than America is that even during a jazz festival, all you hear in the airports and hotel lobbies is Kenny G. Contrary to what Americans tend to believe, jazz is no more popular with the masses in Europe than it is back home. On the other hand, could Muhal Richard Abrams or Paul Bley fill a thousand-seat auditorium even in New York, as each came close to doing in Matosinhos? In its own country, jazz offers evidence of the diversity of American culture, much like pizza parlors and Chinese restaurants.

Abroad, along with those same pizzerias and Chinese take-outs, it becomes another example of the Americanization of Europe. Foreign audiences inevitably bring their own references to jazz, and their perceptions can be valuable. Possibly only a European audience like the one I heard Ibrahim with would have appreciated how “European” his collage-like performance was both in presentation and hush, for all of Ibrahim's allusions