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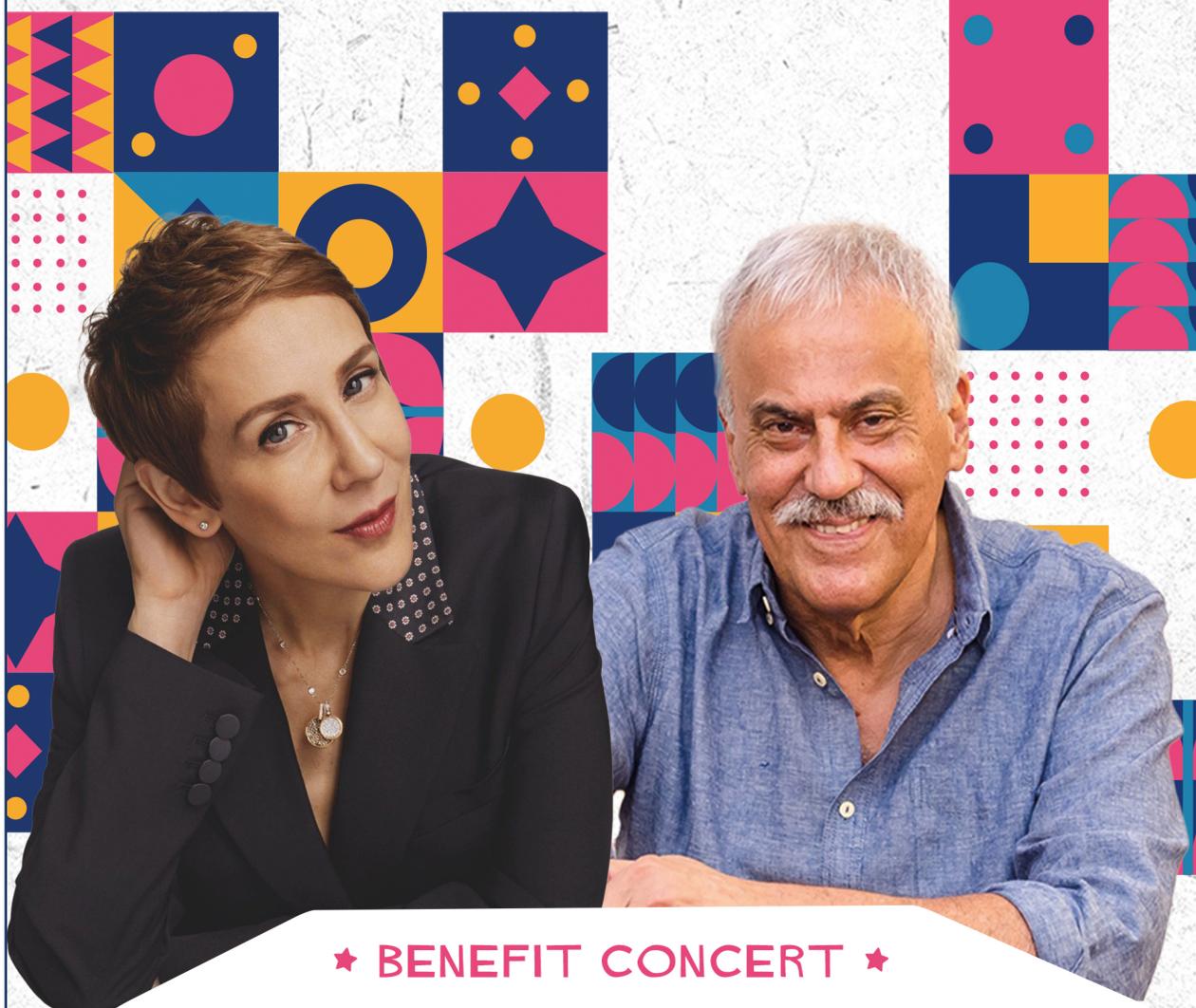
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FESTIVAL REPORT

SAVOY JAZZFEST

BY WIF STENGER



MINNA HATTINEN

Lizz Wright/UMO Helsinki Jazz Orchestra @Savoy JAZZFest

Built as a movie theatre in 1937, Helsinki's cozy Savoy Theatre brought internationally renowned performers like the American-born, French singer-dancer-actress Josephine Baker (1906-75) to the Finnish capital in the 1940s. As this year's annual Savoy JAZZFest (Mar. 5-8) recently revealed, it still showcases plenty of high-profile performers, including many New Yorkers. The event's NYC ties are strong, thanks to its artistic director, Finland-born, NYC-based bassist **Kaisa Mäensivu**, who met her partner, ex-Lady Gaga drummer Joe Peri, at the Manhattan School of Music a decade ago and who have since split their time between both cities. In the middle of a European tour promoting a new album with her band Kaisa's Machine, the couple performed two gigs at this year's festival.

Mäensivu admitted that this year's edition turned out to be "guitar-heavy" by accident. **Peter Bernstein's** quintet included Oslo-born, fellow guitarist Lage Lund, as well as Manuel Dunkel (tenor), Alexi Tuomarila (keyboards), Mäensivu (bass) and Peri (drums). Neither Bernstein nor Lund have a particularly heavy sound per se, but Bernstein's archtop guitar soared over the quintet, quicksilver pure and fluid, echoing his mentor, Jim Hall. The bassist and drummer were unobtrusive, keeping the fire crackling steadily under it all. The band unveiled robust new compositions by Dunkel, along with the leader's jaunty "Perpetual Pendulum" (the title track from his 2021 *Smoke Sessions* recording). Tuomarila, whose keyboard work can be fiery with his own groups, noticeably came off as a bit staid in comparison with other pianists of the evening.

Italy's **Francesca Tandoi** has a propulsive, high-energy keyboard attack, offering inventive improvisations over familiar bop chords. Backed by her decade-old trio, Tandoi seemed to be having fun as she played the title track from her new album *Bop Web* (Nuccia) at a gleeful, breakneck pace, powered by Dutch drummer, Sander Smeets. She paired that with a tribute to piano great Bobby Timmons called "Ninaom" (try it backwards), reaching over to strum the piano strings for an old-timey banjo feel as bassist Matheus Nicolaiewsky thumped out a strong lead line. The leader then turned on her mic to sing a loungey Julie London-esque "Close to You", backed just by Smeets' brushwork. Then the band nodded to the bassist's Brazilian roots with a Djavan ballad "Oceano" and an urgent version of Antônio Carlos Jobim's "Água de Beber", with calm pools between gushing sets of rapids and the drummer's sudden downshift into a boom bap rhythm. The bossa funk mood continued with an encore medley of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" and "Blame It on the Boogie", ending with just Smeets

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(LABEL SPOTLIGHT CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11)

needs to simmer down. John Coltrane was a master of this." Yet, even the burn is nuanced. Tolliver's "Our Second Father" begins in minor blues territory but swings at 0:17 into its own suspended instant, leaving the scale, exhorting in another center, Cowell arpeggiating and Tolliver micro-trilling while the bassist and drummer abandon time but never the tune's root energy.

Reflecting on that composition, Charles muses on the symbiosis of long-fostered tradition and individual freedom, from Louis Armstrong's early 20th century innovation to his own contribution, the individual contributor bringing self to all aspects of the label over whose rich legacy the Tollivers continue stewardship. That single moment of musical shift, a viscerality sampled and held of which Charles is justly proud, parallels the space Strata-East creates for each album as statement. "We didn't make decisions in some board meeting about our responsibilities; we were responsible to no one. Each album came together as a package, without an art department to develop it."

The vision endures and like that hyphen, itself integral to what Charles calls the label's eclecticism, the Tollivers shepherd this new creative phase with intuition and enthusiasm akin to a musical moment morphing into the next, an ever-blooming vision for both cognoscenti and novitiates as yet unaware of their need for it. As Moore's notes conclude, "Is that resilient enough for you?"

For more info visit mackavenue.com/collections/strata-east. Strata-East artists performing this month include a Gil Scott-Heron tribute at Joe's Pub Apr. 1, Dick Griffin at Sistas' Place Apr. 5 and Reggie Workman at NAMA Apr. 15 and Minton's Playhouse Apr. 17. See Calendar.

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on tambourine and leaving the 750-seat audience "stompin' at the Savoy!"

There was more crowd-pleasing funk, soul and swing the next night as Lizz Wright sang an all-Gershwin program backed by the UMO Helsinki Jazz Orchestra. In her modest un-diva way, Wright explained that an evening of all standards was an interesting challenge for her, though she's performed a similar set of Jim McNeely's Gershwin arrangements with a German big band. Here's hoping she records an album of these warhorses, because they sounded wonderful in her rich, warm contralto, supported by a restrained horn section and her *simpatico* pianist of 27 years, Kenny Banks, Sr. The big band's reeds offered satin-pillowy support for "I've Got a Crush On You", then revved up for the mother of all chord changes, "I Got Rhythm", with a cheeky "Salt Peanuts" interjection and a foot-stompin' Banks solo. That charged into "Slap That Bass" from the Fred Astaire film *Shall We Dance*. First, though, Wright pointedly recited two lines of the lyrics from the dark days of 1937: "Dictators would be better off / If they zoom-zoomed now and then," adding "I'll leave that up to you to interpret." Two weeks earlier, Wright expressed her anguish about performing at the Kennedy Center the night of the presidential coup at that beloved arts institution. Her brief comment at the Savoy was the only reference to a fraught question on the minds of many Europeans at the moment: how to reconcile their love for American culture—epitomized by someone like Wright singing Gershwin—with their horror at the country's latest turns.

There were no overt politics on the festival's final night, although the performers were nearly all Americans, or at least New Yorkers, including the personnel in Kaisa's Machine, which included guest Mark Turner (tenor), along with Max Light (guitar), Eden Ladin (piano), Maënsivu (bass) and Peri (drums). The quintet played tunes from the just-released *Moving Parts* (Greenleaf Music), with Turner in effect standing in for the band's vibraphonist, Sasha Berliner (who was touring elsewhere). With the piano trio maintaining a relatively low-key role, Turner's cool, dry sound and presence counter-balanced Light's often-busy, flashy guitar pyrotechnics. Their instruments paralleled and entwined almost indistinguishably on the new album's closing track, "Best Kept Secrets", while the saxophonist's cerebral ECM-style playing replaced Melissa Aldana's angular saxophone on the recorded version of "Origin Story". Another guest soloist appeared for the new song "Satama (Harbor)": singer Maja Mannila, a young veteran of pianist Iiro Rantala's band as well as various R&B, soul and fusion projects. She knocked the tune out of the park with a soaring scat exploration. Ladin offered a limpid solo piano overture to "Shadow Mind", while the leader modestly shone on several supple, buttery bass spotlights.

Maënsivu introduced the festival's last headliner, guitarist Bill Frisell (who played the same venue last year with trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire). His trio set, made up of one uninterrupted instrumental jam, started tentatively with the leader seemingly suggesting various ideas to see which ones his bandmates—Thomas Morgan (bass) and Rudy Royston (drums)—would pick up on. Through much of the set, the bassist was his main sparring partner (as on their 2017 ECM duo album, *Small Town*). Morgan mostly provided subtle reinforcement, but did earn the only mid-set applause with a slow, thoughtful solo. There were overlong interludes of dozy noodling, countryish twang and trademark Frisell haze toward the start of the show. Gradually though, he began to lead the band into more energetic, skronky experimentation, bringing to mind his '80s Visiones gigs in trio with saxophonist Joe Lovano and drummer Paul Motian. Then in a spellbinding moment, he set up a tinkling loop and launched into a majestic reimagination of the Miles Davis 1969 classic, "In a

Silent Way" (composed by keyboardist Joe Zawinul), with a foreboding undercurrent matching the mood of many in the hall this dark spring.

Next year, Savoy JAZZfest will have a new artistic director, with Berlin-based guitarist Kalle Kalima taking over after Maënsivu's successful three-year stint that has been bolstered by her NYC connections. So next spring may bring a more intentional guitar focus, and likely a more European one.

For more info visit savoyteatteri.fi

(LEST WE FORGET CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10)

Los Angeles, captures the singer's humor in some hilarious song introductions (including pianist Jimmy Rowles' jazz-meets-Country Western original, "The Ballad of Thelonious Monk"). *The Carmen McRae-Betty Carter Duets* (American Music Hall, 1987) represents an endearing portrait of a beautiful friendship, both singers shining in this spontaneous meeting where the audience was perfectly rowdy. And *Carmen Sings Monk* (RCA Novus, 1988) was a highly influential vocal album of Monk masterpieces (over half the album utilizing Jon Hendricks' lyrics). She never had a million-seller but notably, she never sold out to commercialism either. Song choices were the most important to her. Her behind-the-beat phrasing often went hand-in-hand with an ironic interpretation of lyrics.

In her life, McRae struggled with racial discrimination, sexism and homophobia, not to mention the many perils of showbiz. But she was resolute and dedicated to her craft, remembered by drummer Joey Baron (who first played with the vocalist in the mid '70s) as one never to waste words, or notes. "Carmen modelled excellence and integrity every time she unapologetically graced the stage," he says. "As a musician, nobody digs as deep. I remember her out there listening and encouraging artists she deemed worthy. She was a tough but absolutely fair bandleader." Her blessing and her curse was being so completely committed to her truth.

Perhaps McRae can be summarized to an extent by bassist John Clayton, who credits her with being the first singer who forced him to listen to the meaning of a song, noting her interpretation of a lyric as nuanced and powerful. "I saw the other side of Ms. McRae, too. I remember playing in a club with her and some loud-mouth heckler shouted out, 'Hey, sing Tie a Yellow Ribbon!' Carmen, without missing a beat told him (and the whole room), 'Honey, I only sing songs about love.' SNAP! Another time, during a live club recording she sang three bars, stopped the band and asked the audience, 'Who the hell do you think you are?' We're making a live recording here and you have the NERVE to come in here and TALK?! If you want to talk, get outta here—pause—'OK boys, 1, 2, 1-2-3-4'..."

For more info visit carmenmcrae.com. A Carmen McRae tribute "For the Love of Carmen" (featuring Gillian Margot) is at Dizzy's Club Apr. 9. "The Real Ambassadors" (featuring Chris Pattishall, Chris Brubeck, Shenel Johns, Vuyo Sotash, Nicole Zuraitis, Camille Thurman, Endea Owens, Alphonso Horne, et al.) is at Appel Room Apr. 4-5 (presented by Louis Armstrong House Museum). See Calendar.

Recommended Listening:

- Carmen McRae—*By Special Request* (Decca, 1956)
- Carmen McRae—*Sings Lover Man and Other Billie Holiday Classics* (Philips/Columbia, 1961)
- Carmen McRae—"Live" and *Wailing (Woman Talk)* (Mainstream, 1965)
- Carmen McRae—*The Great American Songbook* (Atlantic, 1971)
- Carmen McRae—*At Ratso's, Vol. 1-3* (Hitchcock Media, 1976)
- Carmen McRae—*Carmen Sings Monk* (RCA Novus, 1988)