JAZZFEST WHITE PLAINS

BY THOMAS STAUDTER

SUSAN NAGIB

Kenny Barron @JazzFest White Plains

Year after year, a generous community spirit mixes with the music that is presented at JazzFest White Plains (20 miles north of Manhattan island). The 14th annual edition (Sep. 10-14) of this popular gathering featured a total of 18 performances (12 with free admission) at ten different venues. And unlike bigger "destination" music festivals, where attendees must make difficult choices or catch just partial sets because acts are hitting different stages hither and yon at the same time, the music at JazzFest is offered almost entirely in sequence, so theoretically you can enjoy nearly every minute of the music. The festival's intimate performance spaces and first-class lineups serve as a clarion call in Gotham's northern suburbs to jazz aficionados and casual fans alike, who relish the opportunity to experience the improviser's art up-close: the result is a communal experience, five days of seeing the same faces and enjoying nice conversations in the audience and at shared tables. Co-presented by the City of White Plains, White Plains BID and the non-profit organization ArtsWestchester, this is an annual success story that puts the cultural and social benefits first and allows the local boosterism to happen organically.

The festival's opener was a not-to-be-missed noontime solo piano recital by **Craig Taborn** at Grace Church, part of its Downtown Music series, which is open to the public. An ongoing characteristic of JazzFest White Plains is booking artists and acts occupying a wide spectrum of styles, and an abiding trust by festival goers in the lineup being presented is at work here—which explains why the pews were packed. Taborn played five improvised selections, the first of which spanned nearly 20 minutes and grew out of two notes that seemed to hang in the stilled sanctuary. Later, he built a delicate melody that had the romantic dreaminess of a long-ago standard before increasing the volume, splashing chords and embarking on virtuosic runs. The repeated riffs often sounded like electronic music loops, a key component of this innovative, far-reaching artist's mode of finding workable spaces inside of the rhythms he employs.

Another supremely gifted showstopper, trombonist **Wycliffe Gordon**, brought his quintet to White Plains Plaza's "Dinner Under the Stars" to conclude the first day of music, pleasing the crowd with rousing takes on Duke Ellington, Fats Waller and even Joe Zawinul ("Mercy, Mercy, Mercy"). Gordon's pyrotechnical playing is unmatched and his singing, featured on his original "Toast My Bread", was good, bawdy fun. Great solos from pianist Michael Booker and guitarist David

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SOUND & GRAVITY

BY ALAIN DROUOT

COLIN GAHUNGU

Ken Vandermark @Sound & Gravity

Chicago's North Side Roscoe Village neighborhood played home to the inaugural Sound & Gravity festival (Sep. 10-14), filling a gap left by the demise of the Pitchfork Music Festival. The brainchild of drummer Mike Reed, Sound & Gravity is designed to find new revenue streams for Reed's not-for-profit organization At Pluto, while utilizing venues he owns: Constellation and the Hungry Brain. Other venues were also enlisted, including Judson & Moore Distillery, Beat Kitchen, Guild Row and Rockwell On The River, all supporting an event that drew comparisons with the Big Ears Festival (Knoxville, TN)—albeit on a much smaller scale—whose venues are also similarly within walking distances from each other. The multiplicity and variety of shows (Jeff Parker Expansion Trio, Tarbaby, The Messthetics and James Brandon Lewis, Ken Vandermark, Luke Stewart's Chicago Quartet, et al.), however, sometimes made for tough choices: e.g. Chicago Underground Duo, Michael Zerang's Puzzle House and Anna Webber's Simple Trio all were in direct competition without any overlap.

Opening night at Rockwell On The River offered only four sets that nevertheless gave an idea of the wide scope of music that would be presented at the festival. The evening was headlined by **Sam Prekop**'s electronics and guitarist **Mdou Moctar**. Disappointment ensued with the former's lack of originality, while the latter's relentlessness grew tiresome. Fortunately, Sound & Gravity's offerings only improved in the ensuing days. Upon entering the Hungry Brain the following day, the welcome news was to see a piano tuner at work—a good omen for the solo performance that pianist **Cooper-Moore** delivered. An epic improvisation displayed the many facets of this magnificent NYC-based musician. Starting with a lovely introduction, he progressively peppered in dissonance. Moving forward, predictably unpredictability was the rule. Cooper-Moore could alternately be percussive, paint complex abstract pictures, launch into a rambunctious blues or lose himself in romantic ruminations. Several melodies kept poking their heads up, then found their way back. At one point, he revealed that he was not afraid of displaying a vulnerability in his struggle to find inspiration—uttering frustration before finally taking a swig from his beer (going against his doctor's orders). The pianist concluded his impressive performance with a Satie-like passage, which was both minimalist and melodic.

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INWOOD JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY ELIJAH SHIFFER

ALAN NAHIGIAN

Akua Dixon @Inwood Jazz Festival

Inwood, at the northernmost tip of Manhattan, has long been a neighborhood in need of more live jazz venues, especially given the number of musicians who live there. In recent years, though, the Inwood Jazz Festival has brought this top-corner of the city a bit of buzz in the jazz scene. Now in its third year, this annual outdoor celebration is the brainchild of drummer Aaron Scott, an Inwood native best known for his work with McCoy Tyner in the '90s. This year's edition (Sep. 21) was exquisitely organized with a spectacular lineup. Clearly a musician's touch was in the bookings, with an emphasis placed on local NYC talent and on clever blends of genres and traditions. In the perfect weather, warm but not too hot, the festival attracted a sizeable audience throughout. There was a strong sense of community in the crowd, boosted by audience participation, which nearly all bands engaged in at some point in their sets.

Kevin Nathaniel's Spirit Ensemble, which combines traditional instruments and rhythms from across the African diaspora, began the proceedings. The percussion trio at the core of this group—Nathaniel, Hasan Bakr and Victor See Yuen—assembled in Isham Park for an interactive children's workshop before heading to the main stage across the street in Inwood Hill Park for their full band set. All three players effectively displayed their talents as both educators and entertainers, making everything fun as they demonstrated on their instruments: shekere and mbira (Nathaniel), djembe (Bakr) and cajon (See Yuen). The many children in the audience seemed either too young or too polite to sing along, but perked up when dancing was involved. Spirit Ensemble's main-stage set fleshed out the same songs from the workshop, adding Colette Michaan (flutes), Salieu Suso (kora), the aptly-named Marcus Steele (steel drum) and Bill Dotts (electric bass). The unlikely combination of southern Africa's mbira, the West African kora and Caribbean steel drum created a shimmery, mellifluous harmony. The full septet was just as fun as the earlier trio version, playing hypnotic grooves that made each song a party.

Cuban pianist-percussionist-vocalist **Melvis Santa** and the Jazz Orishas—featuring Josh Evans (trumpet), Leandro Pellegrino (guitar), Jason Clotter (bass) and Rafael Monteagudo (drums)—is a unique quintet, which presented a fascinating contemporary take on Afro-Cuban music. The tempos were often slower than expected, but full of powerful momentum. The most

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Another stellar display came from alto saxophonist **Darius Jones** and his trio (with bassist Chris Lightcap and drummer Jason Nazary), which together performed mostly music drawn from last year's *Legend of e'Boi (The Hypervigilant Eye)*. Jones just needed a couple of notes to launch the tunes before closing his eyes and taking in the music played by his partners, who would inform his lines once he'd decided to join in, a show of patience that was a tribute to the saxophonist's maturity. The bassist's elegant lines and effective grooves anchored the band while the drummer's crisp and muscular rhythmic playing kept the momentum going, with snare drum hits that could shake the soul. The set took a different turn with closer "No More My Lord", a song by Henry Jimpson Wallace recorded by ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax at a Mississippi penitentiary where the former was incarcerated. The leader's slow and soulful delivery became heart-rending, full of humanity. Lightcap's drone-like arco work with Nazary's drum rolls added appropriate drama, and the band as a whole ramped up in a most subtle manner to reach a satisfying apex. The saxophonist's goal of letting Wallace "live a little longer through my horn" was unquestionably achieved.

The next day was highlighted by tenor saxophonist and flutist **Anna Webber** and her Simple Trio appearing at Constellation—a venue that has become a pillar of Chicago's creative music scene. The set drew exclusively from the trio's latest release, *simpletrio2000*. If the opening piece, "SlingshØt", served as a warmup, it certainly defined the band's style, with drummer John Hollenbeck's unmistakable sound, the leader's textured and edgy tenor and pianist Matt Mitchell's versatility. But the *pièce de resistance* soon followed: "Idiom VII", a mesmerizing composition full of twists and turns with a unique architecture. The other pieces underlined the leader's growth as a composer and featured nods to minimalism through the use of repetitive patterns. Busy with her new position on the faculty of the New England Conservatory, the job has clearly not hindered her creative process.

Tenor saxophonist **Zoh Amba** took the stage at the Hungry Brain with her Sun Ensemble. Most of the set focused on her fierce, unbridled playing. She can sound like a Peter Brötzmann disciple, down to facial expressions that eerily resembled those of the legendary German musician. And when she dug out some joyful lines, conjured memories of Albert Ayler or the late local hero Mars Williams (who wore Ayler's influence on his sleeve) came to mind and, on several occasions, brought Amba down on her knees. As for her cohorts, the brilliant pianist Lex Korten was more than a sympathetic player whereas drummer Miguel Marcel Russell was arguably less successful, though his exuberance did achieve a rare feat in covering the leader's powerful blowing. The set concluded with several avant-folk songs with the support of drummer Jim White, of Australia's The Dirty Three, who recently relocated to Chicago. Urging the audience not to leave the room as she was tuning her guitar, Amba's vocals recalled Joanna Newsom's in its childlike quality and emotionalism, which caused her voice to break at times. It was an unconventional ending, yet served as quite fitting for this festival.

On the last day, a smile finally appeared on **Mike Reed**'s face. The drummer added at the last minute a performance by his group The Big Gig, in tribute to the legacy of South African musicians (e.g. pianist Chris McGregor and saxophonist Dudu Pukwana), as well as a nod to the Ellington-Strayhorn partnership. The group's three-saxophone frontline included Nick Mazzarella, Hunter Diamond and Keefe Jackson, with Cole Degenova (keyboards), Jason Roebke (bass) and the drummer-leader, whose appearance suitably demonstrated that from an impresario's perspective, the festival had been a success worth celebrating and an event that he not only could be proud of but could start thinking and working towards next year's sophomore edition.

For more info visit soundandgravity.org

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impassioned moments were in vocal and percussion features, but Santa's piano playing also stood out; in her deliberate and measured style, she infused meaning in every note. Evans seemed a bit out of place with his gloomy sound; there are plenty of trumpeters with strong Afro-Cuban chops who could have made this band that much more exciting.

Quartette Indigo's set was perhaps the high point of the entire festival. Led by Akua Dixon, this chamber-jazz group actually played as a quintet, with its all-string lineup of Dixon (cello), Meg Okura and Charisa Dowe Rouse (violins), Eddie Venegas (viola) and Calvin Jones (bass). On originals and standards alike, this soulful yet tight ensemble showed the full potential of bowed strings in a jazz setting. Dixon's charming arrangements sounded very satisfying to play, particularly a version of Dizzy Gillespie's "A Night in Tunisia", which breathed new life into the weathered classic. Focused equally on melody and swing, and with exciting solos from all members, this band seemed to put a smile on everyone's face. A bald eagle soared over the stage during the set—somehow a fitting cameo.

Stefon Harris & Blackout concluded the main-stage portion of the festival with the current formation of the vibraphonist's quintet. Featuring Jaleel Shaw (alto, soprano), Christian Sands (piano), Dezron Douglas (bass), Terreon Gully (drums) and guest Alicia Olatuja (vocals), this was both the most polished and most virtuosic band of the day. Each member was a burst of fiery energy throughout, but all came together for a slick ensemble sound with precisely choreographed shifts of tempo. For such a relatively small group, there was an abundance of different sounds at the players' disposal: between the leader's vibraphone and marimba, Shaw's saxophones, and acoustic and electric options for each the pianist and bassist, Blackout shifted between post-bop and R&B influences with ease and flair. Harris has a knack for keeping the proceedings entertaining at all times, even in a background role; his accompaniment behind Olatuja featured simultaneous tremolos on both of his instruments. On one number, he had the audience name four notes, on which he and Sands started a wily duo improvisation that led to a burning-tempo take of Juan Tizol's "Caravan".

The festivities then moved indoors to Inwood Farm, a restaurant next to the park. Here, flugelhorn player **Melvin Vines** and vocalist **Okaru Hoshino Lovelace** hosted a concluding jam session. The all-star house band began with a set, which, like Harris', drew equally from bebop and R&B; the seasoned rhythm section of Jack Glottman (piano), Lonnie Plaxico (bass) and Victor Jones (drums) laid down tight grooves for Vines to float over with florid, baroque-ornamented lines. The guest musicians who sat in afterward included several Inwood residents (the neighborhood itself had been curiously underrepresented on the main stage). Vocalist **Charenee Wade** led the audience in yet more call-and-response on Pharoah Sanders' "The Creator Has A Master Plan". Pianist **Eli Yamin** and drummer **Annette Aguilar** joined for the final song, a quirky salsa version of Thelonious Monk's "Well, You Needn't". In its creative stylistic fusion, this conclusion offered an apt summation of the entire festival.

For more info visit inwoodjazzfestival.com

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extended beyond straight-forward bop. After leaving Monk, Rouse revealed his sense of adventure in the studio. *Two Is One*, his recently reissued 1974 Strata-East album, features Calo Scott's cello blending with smoky tenor amidst bluesy guitars (George Davis and Paul Metzke); elsewhere are featured percussionists Azzedin Weston and Airto Moreira. Most impressive is the album's title track, which includes a segment where bassist Stanley Clarke (in his early 20s at the time) holds down a 9/8 ostinato while drummer David Lee pivots in 6/8 and Rouse and Scott play in 3/4.

Rouse then assembled an even more ambitious outing—a bossa nova big band featuring the playing and arrangements of Brazilian pianist Dom Salvador and guitarist Amaury Tristão. The album also includes trumpeter Claudio Roditi and drummer Portinho. However, when it was released as *Cinnamon Flower* in 1977 on Douglas, the producer Alan Douglas had given it a slick sheen by overdubbing extra drums, strings and keyboards. George Klabin (now president of Resonance) recorded the original session and remembers its release. "I was very disappointed when the record came out," he says. "You have this really lovely, cohesive, well-put-together music. You have solos that are really good. You have music that's really meaningful. And then he (Douglas) comes in and makes it commercial."

When Klabin discovered he had the only copy of the original session mixes, his Resonance label released it side-by-side with the original Douglas mixes, plus added an unreleased track. Chico also likes the package: "I know Dad is smiling, man. He's beside himself, somewhere," he says, breaking into a hearty laugh. Throughout these diverse recordings, one thing stands out: Charlie Rouse doesn't dominate the music. He shares space with Roditi, Calo Scott and Salvador to such an extent that it might be hard to tell who is leading. "He was a very good collective player," Rouse's son affirms. "He had a way of maintaining his own identity but (he could) get in the soup and complete whatever the ingredients are in there. That's a heck of a thing, to be able to balance that."

For more info visit therouselegacygroup.com

Recommended Listening:

- Tadd Dameron Sextet—*Featuring the Fabulous Fats Navarro* (Blue Note, 1947)
- Charlie Rouse Quintet—*Takin' Care of Business* (Jazzland, 1960)
- Thelonious Monk—*Straight, No Chaser* (Columbia, 1966-67)
- Charlie Rouse—*Two Is One* (Strata-East, 1974)
- Sphere—*Four In One* (Elektra Musician, 1982)
- Charlie Rouse—*Epistrophy: The Last Concert* (Landmark, 1988)

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Rosenthal took some of the load off the hard-working leader.

Among JazzFest offerings free to all comers were sets from flute player **Sherry Winston** at the Farmer's Market, a so-so showcase for such a renowned talent; young France-born, Montreal-based vocalist **Laura Anglade** at the public library; cabaret vocalist **Juliet Ewing** (from close-by Croton-on-Hudson) at downtown restaurant Shiraz Kitchen & Wine Bar; and Colombian pianist-composer **Pablo Mayor**'s trio around the corner at Chazz Palminteri Italian Restaurant. Mayor's set was a revelation. The artistic director of NYC's Folklore Urbano Orchestra, Mayor soon had a noisy, crowded eatery in rapt attention as he presented groove-laden originals including "Benito Viento" and "Chande en 5", his melodic electric piano runs ably supported by bassist Ray Martínez (a longtime foil for Mongo Santamaría) and drummer Franco Pinna, whose exquisite percolating polyrhythmic playing was a wonder to behold. The bandleader's pan-American scope of sounds fused into the jazz idiom was another festival highlight. Other free shows included the remarkable, seemingly ageless pianist **Bertha Hope** (she turns 89 this month) leading a trio with special guest Joe Boykin, a silky-smooth baritone vocalist from nearby Greenburgh, NY, and the **Music Conservatory of Westchester Jazz Faculty Ensemble** with Mark Kraszewski (tenor), Dinah Vero-Chesimar (piano) and featuring Jaana Narsipur (vocals); their take on "Until You Come Back to Me (That's What I'm Going to Do)" was superb.

A compelling and entertaining intersection of community voices and improvisers, the annual JazzFest performance by the **Jazz & Poetry Choir Collective** featured the declamatory talents of E.J. Antonio, Andrea Wolper, City of Yonkers Poet Laureate Golda Solomon and Westchester Poet Laureate Phylisha Phylli Villanueva, backed by a band of stalwart collaborators that included Jason Kao Hwang (violin), Michael TA Thompson (drums), nonagenarian Warren Smith (percussion) and musical director Christopher Dean Sullivan (bass) with special guest, woodwinds specialist JD Parran. This frisky presentation, held in the evening at the ArtsWestchester headquarters (a converted bank building) touched on "the man in that mirror that plays bass" and how "I miss the old jazz clubs" before Wolper concluded with a charming rendition of "You Are My Sunshine" in tribute to the 1962 George Russell recording, *The Outer View*, on which the singer was Sheila Jordan (who had passed away in August). Parran's flute beautifully filled the solo spaces. For the nominal $10 admission, this show was a full plate of stirring words and sounds.

The festival's other ticketed performances took place at the ArtsWestchester HQ as well, including appearances by headliners **Kurt Elling** and **Kenny Barron**, who played two sets on Friday and Saturday nights, respectively, and a Saturday afternoon set by alto saxophonist **Immanuel Wilkins**' quartet. For the area jazz fans, these shows were the festival's *pièces de resistance*, a welcome opportunity to experience star power at close range. Elling, taking a night off from his current stint in *Hadestown* on Broadway, was paired with pianist Joey Calderazzo as part of the vocalist's ongoing *Wildflowers* project, exhibiting total command and winning charm. The duo replicated several tunes in each set, but their improvisatory gifts are so immense—and winning—that the different takes on Thelonious Monk's "In Walked Bud", "It's Only a Paper Moon" and the overlooked Weather Report gem "Current Affairs" offered insights into the hatching of creative impulses between two in-sync artists. The next day, Wilkins touched on compositions from his three albums, his powerful, Charlie Parker-like lines swirling and circling around melodies atop a churning rhythm section that featured pianist Marta Sanchez. In the evening, Barron, now 82, led a trio with longtime bassist Kiyoshi Kitagawa and drummer E.J. Strickland, which settled into the highest echelon of jazz mastery imaginable and stayed there all night long. Moving between originals, standards and varied covers (Caetano Veloso, Charlie Haden, Eddie Heywood), Barron made clear that exciting and wholly engaging jazz pianism can exist in the pocket.

JazzFest concluded with an all-day outdoor gathering open to the public and held right in the middle of Mamaroneck Ave., the main thoroughfare of White Plains. The weather had been just beautiful throughout, a climate-change endless summer as it were, that taking in the music in such ideal conditions seemed too good to be true. Pianist **Pete Malinverni**, a stalwart of the Purchase College jazz program, led his Invisible Cities Quintet, which afforded ample soloing to trumpeter Bruce Harris and tenor saxophonist Grant Stewart. Latin percussionist and bandleader, Chembo Corniel, pushed the music into such a delightful high gear that some attendees began to dance in front of the stage.

As the sun set, the proceedings were capped by trombonist **Steve Turre** fronting an all-star band that included Ron Blake (tenor), Wallace Roney, Jr. (trumpet), young phenom Isaiah J. Thompson (piano), Gerald Cannon (bass) and the leader's son Orion Turre (drums). The trombonist's composition "Don D." (from his 2022 album *Generations*), an homage to Skatalites trombonist-composer Don Drummond, occasioned great solos from all the horn players and the leader on his exotic conch shells, which made a special stretch of days (and nights) in White Plains all the more memorable.

For more info visit artswestchester.org/programs/jazzfest-whiteplains