

FESTIVAL REPORT

NYC WINTER JAZZFEST

BY TOM GREENLAND



Munit Mesfin @Brooklyn Bowl (Winter Jazzfest)

COURTESY OF WINTER JAZZFEST

BRUSSELS JAZZ FESTIVAL

BY MARTIN LONGLEY



Chelsea Carmichael @Flagey (Brussels Jazz Festival)

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Arguably the planet's premiere exposition of live jazz, the NYC Winter Jazzfest (WJF) recently ran its 22nd season (Jan. 8-13) under the slogan "Still We Rise," a celebration of Black cultural resilience, its title borrowed from famed poet Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise". Below is an earwitness account of a dozen+ sets over the course of four of its six nights.

Thursday's opening night included "Brazil Music Club" at Nublu, where **Jamile Ayres** and **Vinicius Gomes'** quartet covered Brazilian and American composers. Her radiant, supple contralto coiled around Gomes' limber, clean-toned guitar, her fast flighty scats floating over his subtly-shifting harmonic rhythms. On Wayne Shorter's "Endangered Species", after an adventurous guitar solo, the quartet's swinging outro groove was spurred by a bartender shaking his cocktail mixer like a Brazilian *chocalho*. This set was followed by guitarist **Flávio Silva**, whose long-limbed, chromatically-enhanced, legato lines glided over pianist Luther Allison's arpeggios and drummer Zack O'Farrill's puckish percussive rejoinders.

Friday night belonged to WJF's Manhattan Marathon, an embarrassment of riches that can derange even veteran jazz fans who eagerly anticipate the shows they've planned to attend, but are also painfully aware of many promising shows they'll be forced to miss because these other events are scheduled simultaneously in separate venues. Your stoic correspondent accepted the risks and forged ahead. Foraging began at Drom, where two of jazz' finest biculturalists headlined. Opening was the **Arun Ramamurthy** Trio playing music deeply informed by both jazz and South Indian Carnatic traditions. The leader's poignant rubato violin introduced the raga "Dhanasri", then developed its circular theme, buoyed by extended rhythmic cycles outlined by Damon Banks (bass) and Sameer Gupta (drums). The centerpiece was the *New Moon* suite, tethered to Banks' booming open E string as Gupta's rapid stick patterns pressed and swerved. The set was followed by trumpeter-vocalist **Amir ElSaffar's** New Quartet interpreting his unique hybrid of jazz and Iraqi maqam cultures. Tania Giannouli's piano was retuned microtonally, the second scale pitch now "half-flat," while ElSaffar and tenor saxophonist Ole Mathisen achieved the same effect through extended techniques, the horns playing in loose unison, then splitting into strange rubbing harmonies. There were bright moments when the leader's horn rose in a clarion call; when his soulful, melismatic singing

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Ixelles lies just south of Belgium's Brussels city centre, with its evocative two-pool duck-waddling park and its looming Eglise Sainte-Croix. Here lies Flagey, a beautiful, Art Deco former radio station headquarters, now living as one of the city's key arts venues. Its exterior looks like a toweringly ornate cruise ship, and its several concert halls are former broadcast studios, wood-inlaid for fine acoustics.

This year's Brussels Jazz Festival (Jan. 15-24) presented 18 acts, including the ambitious opener of Danish guitarist Jakob Bro with the Brussels Philharmonic. But it was exactly one week later, when the 10-day festival launched into intense overdrive and one of its finest sets: Chicagoan **Isaiah Collier**. The saxophonist specializes in presenting different band formations, playing compositions to suit, with recent tours offering the expanded soul-funk groove experience of his Chosen Few. Festival attendees may not have expected what was a new direction, however, even though it's hard not to notice that Collier has elected to dedicate most of this year's gigging (and news of his upcoming album release) to the celebration of John Coltrane's centennial. That might not sound so innovative, but it soon became apparent that this quartet were set on massively (re)energizing the Coltrane repertoire, as if imagining how the late saxophonist would have sounded if living beyond his 1967 passing.

Collier navigates with a stunning force of agile virtuosity and emotional power. It was, quite frankly, astonishing to witness such a level of vital reinterpretation, enforced with equality via the soloing prowess of Davis Whitfield (piano), Conway Campbell (bass) and Tim Regis (drums). The young Whitfield came to prominence playing with the veteran Elvin Jones-inspired drummer Franklin Kiermyer, and makes a fine addition to this lineup. Collier takes the classic quartet and feeds in jolts of spiraling energy that arrive from Coltrane's free(r) large ensemble recordings towards the end of his life. This particular blend inspires, as the free-wheeling tenor solos issue forth, with Campbell's barrelling deep-toned bass ferally-hung, and Regis flailing sticks with ultimate crash control, before the leader stepped back into the brawl. The lesser-heard "Transition" opened this frightening portal, followed by "My Favorite Things" (justified in its made-fresh interpretation), then "Impressions", again not so often selected by admirers.

The following night's set by English drummer

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created a hush, and when tenor and trumpet twined together in a rising, rousing climax.

At Zinc Bar, **The Hemphill Stringtet** performed Julius Hemphill's arrangements for the World Saxophone Quartet and three of his string arrangements of Charles Mingus tunes. You'd think that a string quartet would have difficulty matching the brio and bluster of a saxophone quartet, but cellist Tomeka Reid's impeccable timing became a decisive factor, lofting and swinging the others, owning the lower register in a way that would have made the late Hamiet Bluiett (WSQ's baritone saxophonist) proud. Next was vocalist **Laura Anglade**, whose dark eye make-up and fashionable accoutrements suggested an icon of the silent silver screen. Her voice, relaxed and delicate, stayed with you, each note carefully sculpted and burnished, nothing thrown away. On Peter Nero's "Sunday in New York" she sang an extended, inventive scat solo.

French trumpeter **daoud**'s quartet set at Bitter End (part of the annual French Quarter events, under the WJF umbrella) navigated mercurial mood swings, from tender to titanic, as he, head bobbling like a dashboard ornament, pulled the pulse back even as Quentin Braine's volatile drumming pushed it forward, Remi Bouyssi re's bass booming loud enough to shake your chest cavity. One of the final sets for the Manhattan Marathon portion was **James Brandon Lewis**' Trio (with electric bassist Josh Werner and drummer Chad Taylor) at Drom, which proved to be the perfect nightcap to an eventful evening. Beginning with a strong but sensitive, Coltrane-esque treatment of Eddie Harris' "Alicia", the leader gathered power and momentum as the set progressed. Multicolored spotlights bounced off his tenor saxophone bell like a scintillant Christmas tree, returning at last to a tender soliloquy on the ballad "Within You Are Answers", a set highpoint despite Lewis' noticeable struggles with a problematic reed.

The next night was dedicated to WJF's Brooklyn Marathon, which generated the same cognitive dissonance: too many (great!) shows, too little time. First up was the Russ Gershon-led **Either/Orchestra** at Brooklyn Bowl, playing all-Ethiopian repertoire and featuring Ethiopian vocalists Munit Mesfin and Bruke Tesfaye. The infectious world-beat groove of the band was enhanced by video jockey Will Glasspiegel's live-edited visual effects splaying over bare brick walls, synced to and layered against the hall's myriad sights and bowling pin sounds to create a surfeit of sensory stimulation. Brother/sister team **Samora** and **Elena Pinderhughes** dropped a love-bomb on the crowd at National Sawdust. Their intelligent, accessible songs, sung with pliant, expressive voices that sounded even sweeter when blended in harmony, proffered messages of hope and perseverance, apropos for an audience apprehensive about the country's political climate change.

At Superior Ingredients, **David Binney**'s Action Trio blended prerecorded loops with live improv, the alto saxophonist's fingers abur over the keys as he shredded through prodigious solos. Drummer Louis Cole almost stole the set with slippery but solid beat-keeping and hyped-up spoken word segments. Next on the same stage, vibraphonist **Joel Ross**' sextet performed pieces from his new release, *Gospel Music* (Blue Note). His tricky but tuneful arrangements, often punctuated with rolling accent patterns, were lifted and sustained by his effervescent solos, a constant delight. Trumpeter **Adam O'Farrill**'s Elephant, appearing at Loove Annex, defied category. There were familiar musical references, recognizable structures, but now amalgamated in a thoroughly original way, played with a level of precision and panache that promises great things for this project. Pianist Yvonne Rogers' protean touch, delicate yet decisive, perfectly partnered with the leader's equally protean trumpet playing, expressed in echoes, shakes, ripping sheets, stratospheric flights

and low feral roars.

Freedom Riders, held at Le Poisson Rouge on WJF's penultimate night, served as a musical manifesto of resistance against, as festival founder Brice Rosenbloom put it, "forces trying to divide us and spread unfortune." Anchored by bassist Ben Williams' tenacious approach, the assembled collective of youthful lions dug deep, musically and spiritually. The acme came midway during vocalist **Dee Dee Bridgewater**'s charismatic cameo on Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit". It was a moment of communitas and transcendence, when anything seemed possible, when—at least for that moment—our deeply divided nation felt a little more like "Our Country, 'Tis of We."

For more info visit winterjazzfest.com

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Tom Skinner held an added quiet strength by representing a musically polar opposite approach: concentrating on subtle gestures and flowing ease, calming, meditative and sensitized to tonal colorations. Skinner maintains his jazz activities by the side of The Smile, now that Shabaka Hutchings' Sons of Kemet is disbanded. The drummer's spread of musicians are well-selected for this intended mood shaping: cello, piano, bass and twinned tenor saxophones were poised for thoughtful actions, though Chelsea Carmichael gave her flute preferential treatment beside Robert Stillman's tenor. Lulled into drift, listeners' ears were tenderly consumed, until Skinner hit a massive bass-drum boom and Tom Herbert opened up a chunky electric bass line, flute and tenor joining for a wiry and winding procession. These pieces lie in the verdant regions of filmic grandeur, an extended ritual groove, as keyboard player Jonathan Geyevu moved over to the drum kit, joining Skinner for a mallet-softness interlude. "The Maxim" was a highlight, lifted from the new *Kaleidoscopic Visions* album, with Kareem Dayes sounding as if he was playing a West African n'goni rather than cello. Then the climax arrived: Carmichael hoisted her tenor and embarked on a step-by-step ascension that completely contrasted with the rest of the set, lifting proudly above the sonic forest, slurred in its seeking progress. "The Journey" arrived as an encore, with its inherent stop-start itchiness.

Earlier the same day, a lunchtime set displayed the positive state of Belgian jazz, with Ghent pianist **Orson Claeys** leading a shining band of bass and drums, plus the trumpet of Daniel Migliosi, who acted as if the nominal leader, so prominent were his repeatedly frontal solos on the horn. To compensate in advance, he'd made a delayed onstage appearance, after the others had been setting up an entry-vamp. The themes were breezy, mellow and approachable, lightly funky with a crisply-muted trumpet solo encouraged by the leader's pushing piano lines. The mute was removed and the drums frolicked playfully, until an *a capella* trumpet solo returned. Claeys pulled out a bluesy feature, followed by a bass spotlight over brushes on drum skins. A chunky spill issued forth out of this delicacy, and Migliosi came back with a clarion call. The bandleader revealed sharp arranging skills in performances of "Emphasis of a Dream", "Primrose" and new pieces "Drift" and "For Ambrose", fleetly moving with an atmospheric stage lighting hue. As if by surprise, Wayne Shorter's "Footprints" brought forth Fender Rhodes for the end run, the ensemble sound getting ever-spacey.

The evening before, an actual trumpet leader did hold sway. **Milena Casado** worked the divide between acoustic jazz and sampled electro-jitter. Her live set was an improvement on her debut album from last year (*Reflection of Another Self*), with its horn special effects tamed slightly. On the recorded work, Casado (from Spain, but NYC-based) tends to ladle on the knob-twiddled soup overmuch, whereas the onstage combo

now had more room to express its jazz core. Casado also suffers from an overabundance of interest in audience involvement, to the point where she's on the verge of bullying the crowd into participation—jokingly, but with serious intent. Behind (or beneath) all of the fx clutter, the trumpeter played some winning solos, and it's not as though electronic or sampling interference is frowned on by this scribe, just that her chosen palette is sonically ill-judged. Unfortunately, this band also featured the dreaded EWI, played by Morgan Guerin, not exactly being the Marshall Allen of the instrument. As compensation, the drumming of Jongkuk Kim was continually resourceful in its imagination. "I Don't Care What You Think" provided a fanfare-rouser closer, cutting the crap for a spaciouly burnished solo before heading towards a luminous piano feature with some detailed drum contemplation.

For more info visit flagey.be/brusselsjazzfestival

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she wants to step back though. "Recently people have approached me with their records to put out, but I need a break." Mezzacappa has a goal, though. Her hope is, after a bit, to transform her concepts and label into a collective where a committee of artists decide what to release in any given year and pool efforts to make that happen. Oakland-based composer Nathan Clevenger, who has worked with Mezzacappa for twenty years, says he was "immediately on board" when she suggested releasing *Astrolabe*, a 74-minute composition for his 12-piece ensemble. "I have nothing but positive feelings about the label and the integrity and hard work Lisa invested in every step of the project," he affirms, adding that, "The Bay Area scene I grew up experiencing is a huge influence on my work. It feels appropriate that this album sits next to the work of so many inspirational local colleagues."

The environment that Mezzacappa and Queen Bee inhabit is one of music's evolution: record stores have mostly closed and the majority of listeners have moved on to streaming. The consequence, she notes, is that "little labels are special for the ways they curate different corners of the jazz scene." She also notes there's been a democratization of music distribution via platforms such as Bandcamp, which she observes is "how you can get to know a regional musical scene that's artist-directed like that in the Bay Area." Another observation, from Clevenger, is that currently "it's hard for artists or labels to get reviews, with the dwindling space for both in our current media environment." He acknowledges Mezzacappa's dedication to drawing attention to the 12-in-12 releases, an activity he notes is missing from other labels he's been involved with. Clevenger was also hoping that the novelty of the 12-in-12 project might be a hook for press coverage. "I've had more press for this album than my previous few," he says. This documentation is also done without any directives or quotas either. For instance, Beth Schenck is the only female bandleader featured on the 12-in-12 releases. "I do my best to support women bandleaders and composers in my community," Mezzacappa says, adding, "I was on another nice record by a woman bandleader-composer this year, but the 12 slots were already filled."

Overall, Mezzacappa feels that nonprofits and institutions have a responsibility to be representative and be sure their programs and initiatives are accessible to a wide range of artists from different backgrounds. As she enters the next realm of her work beyond the 12-in-12 project, Mezzacappa continues to view the label as a "rising tide" intended to support fellow artists, creative thinkers and collaborators who define the West Coast scene.

For more info visit queenbeerecords.bandcamp.com