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Toshiko Akiyoshi

Live at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola
September 16-17, 2005

By Steve Jankowski

Dizzy's Place is located at 33 West 60th. But trust me, this is not the location of a Brownstone with a cozy club in the basement.

This unremarkable address identifies the location of those two monoliths now residing on the West Side of Columbus Circle. For our purposes, look for the "JAZZ" sign at the corner of 60th and enter there. Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola is located on the 5th floor. If you've yet to experience its ambiance, be forewarned this is a "classy" jazz joint, so dress accordingly.

Inside, you'll walk on hardwood floors surrounded by curving Maplewood.

There's a counter along the rear wall, which stretches from the bar area to the club entrance and it's a nice touch. Sit on one of the black bar stools positioned before it and take in the whole room with a glance. The main space contains about 30 tables.

But the most breathtaking aspect of this room, and I'm not over exaggerating, is the "wall" behind the bandstand. It consists of several floor-to-ceiling windows stretching the length of the room, giving the audience an unforgettable panorama of the growing skyline on New York's West Side. Has any late night talk show ever had a more perfectly composed backdrop? I think not.

Of course, last Friday night we were very lucky to be on the Club side of the glass to see and hear the Toshiko Akiyoshi Trio featuring Eddie Marshall on drums and Paul Gill on bass.

As if to emphasize the epic view behind her, Ms. Akiyoshi starts us down "The Long Yellow Road," an original composition based on her experience as an Asian woman in the American and European worlds. She begins with series of thick staccato chords played fff in the center of piano. During one chorus, she even lifted herself off the piano seat to gain more leverage.

Her opening stylistic choice, unaccompanied solo piano played aggressively, will be featured in many of her arrangements. And in this particular case, which details an emotional and personal experience, it is very appropriate. Her playing engages us and moves us—but in a

very formal way. Even when bass and drums enter and accent those 10-finger chord voicings, everything stays pretty much on a straight four. Above a steady rhythmic bed, she brings us fresh melodic twists and turns. Being a very generous artist, Ms. Akiyoshi also gives the drummer and bassist equal time to express themselves. More about that later.

Next, she provides us with a little history. Ms. Akiyoshi says she's been doing this for 60 years, describing the overall experience as "bizarre." She tells us that her mentor was Bud Powell, whom, if I heard correctly, she met in Paris in 1954. Hmm, a young Asian woman attempting to learn jazz piano in Paris in the 50's? "Bizarre" may just be accurate. After reminding us all of Bud's significant contributions



to her life and jazz in general, she introduces the next two selections, a tribute to her mentor entitled "Remembering Bud," followed by Bud's own classic, "Tempus Fugit."

Once again "Remembering" starts with those full chords laying out the theme. Bud may have been her mentor, but she's certainly listened to Dave Brubeck once or twice in her life. This time, however, everything melts into a more relaxed pace: a delicate, respectful swing, over which she captures the essence of her memories—plaintive, evocative and bluesy.

"Tempus Fugit" soars, moving at a breakneck pace that should only be attempted by professionals. Her playing in this number, quite frankly, is astonishing. Here's an individual who's spent 60 years in the business still staying on point with nice ideas even at a frantic tempo.

Next, an original composition entitled "Interlude" gives us a sense of Ms. Akiyoshi's lyrical side. A bossa-nova feel pushes the delightful melody, and her solos in this arrangement are definitely the most romantic and accessible of the evening.

Of all the tunes she selected, my only question concerns her interpretation of "Sophisticated Lady." While the big chord solo thing works effectively in some numbers, it does nothing for me to hear Duke's classic melody so overstated.

One gets the feeling Ms. Akiyoshi has, indeed, played a lot of solo jazz piano over the past 60 years, and it is an approach she maintains in a group context. Even with kick drum and bass defining the bottom, her left hand still spends a great deal of time in the deep, dark end of the piano, kind of like unaccompanied piano with accompaniment.

Speaking of accompaniment, if you are a pianist in search of quality drummer and bassist, I would strongly recommend getting in touch with Eddie Marshall and Paul Gill. They were not merely supporters of but major contributors to the quality of the evening. As mentioned, Ms. Akiyoshi is a generous musician, so they both get a chance to stretch out several times, always with satisfying results. I must single out Paul Gill's solo in the high flying "Tempus Fugit," where he takes the quarter note per beat approach to another level, inventing one entertaining line after another. Eddie Marshall's moment in the final number, (the title was never mentioned) contains everything a good solo should have: surprise, energy and invention.

After 50 minutes of music, it becomes obvious why Ms. Akiyoshi has been around for 60 years—she is superb pianist. And although her sometimes heavy handed style may not appeal to some, she is definitely an original, and that surely recommends her.

The Toshiko Akiyoshi Trio is part of the *Diet Coke Woman in Jazz Festival* which is continuing all this month. Check this publication or call Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola for information. Here's one time where a corporate sponsor is actually sponsoring the right thing.

George Coleman

Live at Smoke
September 8, 2005

By Dan Adler

I attended the first set of the legendary George Coleman's three-night engagement at Smoke September 8-10, 2005. Upon entering, I noticed that there were no music stands on stage, so it was immediately clear that this is going to be an evening of standards played by an all-star group.

George Coleman himself needs no introduction. Most people know his playing from the celebrated Miles Davis albums *Four and More* and *My Funny Valentine* and Herbie Hancock's *Maiden Voyage*. In addition, Coleman has also recorded with B.B. King, Charles Mingus and Cedar Walton, and has numerous albums under his own name. Pianist Harold Mabern is from the same generation as Coleman, having made his name playing with Wes Montgomery, Lee Morgan and many others. Bassist John Webber and drummer Joe Strasser, who are about half the age of Coleman and Mabern, are among the best of the young generation of emerging great players who play frequently at Smoke and other New York clubs.

The set opened with Coleman stating a rubato intro to "Speak Low" which Harold Mabern immediately picked up on, and they quickly launched into an up tempo swing which

had the audience tapping their feet. Strasser and Webber quickly showed that they are more than up to the challenge of playing with these two giants. Mabern's comping is legendary in jazz circles—a powerful mix of the McCoy Tyner style with his own way of developing counter themes and pushing the soloist to new heights. This was no exception, the tension kept building throughout Coleman's well-crafted solo followed by great solos by all.

For the second selection, Coleman motioned to Mabern "Blues in Bb," and proceeded to play Charlie Parker's "Now's the Time" to the audience's delight.

At this point they decided to slow things down a bit and Mabern gave a beautiful intro to "Dedicated to You." Rather than taking it as a slow ballad, this ended up being a mid-tempo swing with occasional double-timing and Latin sections. Mabern evoked shades of Oscar Peterson and Count Basie in his solo, and Webber took a fantastic Bass solo. Coleman took an unaccompanied cadenza while taking the tune out and somehow managed to seamlessly launch into a breakneck-tempo version of "Cherokee," which turned out to be the highlight of the set. The speed was even faster than the opening number, but the players were warmed up and at the peak of their creativity. Mabern kept reharmonizing the bridge and everyone followed along instantly. An imaginative drum solo followed by trading fours before taking it out and ending with the famous vamp.

At this point I thought the set was over as they had been playing for over an hour, but Coleman called another tune "Tennessee Waltz in 3/4." Mabern had a surprised look for a split second, but immediately played a magnificent intro and they went right into yet another crowd-pleaser. Mabern's solo on this tune brought the house to its feet. He started a figure in octaves and chords that was so fast that no one could believe it, but then to top it off, he continued with it and repeated it for a whole chorus. They took the tune out and managed to sneak in a couple of choruses of rhythm changes before wrapping up the set. Needless to say the audience was in heaven, and that was only the first of 3 sets!

With all the emphasis on the up and coming young innovative players, it is nice to sometimes go hear some of the veterans who helped shape this music in the 60's, and who better to represent that generation than George Coleman and Harold Mabern. Catch them if you can!

Harold Mabern Live at Kitano Hotel September 16, 2005

By Al Bunshaft

Walking into the bar at the Kitano Hotel it is immediately evident that the space was not designed for music. The small room, with a capacity of only about 60, has a low ceiling and the sightline from one part of the bar area is obstructed by a pillar. I came in during the closing number of the first set and what I also noticed instantly was the excellent sound that the room has. The unamplified sound of the trio consisting of Harold Mabern on piano, Nat Reeves on bass and Joe Farnsworth on drums was strong and crisp, yet the tone was rich and warm. This is a wonderfully intimate space to experience the music in.

The trio opened their second set of the evening with an Irving Berlin number. While "Let's Face the Music and Dance" has been recorded over a hundred times, Mabern made a point to mention that he is especially fond of Jackie McLean's rendition from his *Swing, Swang, Swingin'* album from the 50's. Mabern then proceeded to play a similarly driving hard-bop rendition of the piece while clearly making it his own. The trio's hard driving, dense collaboration allowed Mabern to stretch out and improvise, occasionally bringing us back to the theme. Reeves took a tasteful bass solo while Farnsworth's solo featured his excellent brush work, something we would hear many times throughout the course of the evening.

Mabern then slowed things down with a ballad, "It Only Hurts When I Smile." The mood was melodic, soothing, almost hypnotizing after the driving opening piece. They then moved into a bossa nova version of the movie tune "Wind Beneath My Wings." I felt like these two pieces were a chance to catch my breath after the opening, and in retrospect they provided a bit of a lull before what came next.

The next piece, which was never introduced, was one of the highlights of the evening. Nat Reeves was featured on bass throughout the piece and his solo was a standout. Mabern was throwing in counterpoint on piano now and then, while obviously enjoying Reeve's work himself. Farnsworth's brush work stood out again and he

took it to another level on his tasteful solo, swinging gently but deeply. The crowd cheered the bass lines as Mabern watched with obvious pleasure.

After a nice version of "Bye Bye Baby" featuring Joe Farnsworth's drumming, Mabern featured one of his own compositions written for (Edward) Lee Morgan called "Edward Lee." The driving hard-bop of this number echoed the sound of the first piece and really showed off Mabern's piano playing. He uses powerful, rhythmic chord patterns which remind me at times of John Hicks, but he also has a lushness to his sound not unlike the sound of McCoy Tyner. The walking bass line of the solo and some powerful swinging with more brush work from Farnsworth kept it all moving forward. This piece was the Mabern Trio at their best.

Mabern then treated us to a long piano solo that was enjoyed by the audience and the other musicians. His rendition of "The Twelfth of Never," the Earth, Wind and Fire number, was pulsing and powerful. Reeves and Farnsworth marveled at the power and drive that Mabern created and maintained throughout the number. After



Harold Mabern

thanking the audience and introducing the trio, Mabern closed with his version of "My Favorite Things." Mabern will turn 70 next March, but he isn't showing any signs of slowing down yet. He clearly enjoys playing, telling stories and sharing his music with the audience in the same way he shares his craft with the younger musicians he plays with.

Dom Minasi

Live at Kavehaz
September 16, 2005

By Gilles Laheurte

The initial effervescence caused by Jackson Krall's almost tardy arrival for the first set soon turned into a dynamite explosion with "Don't Get Around Much Anymore." From the first bars, the music zoomed "out there" like a high speed train, full of gliding energy and sonic inventions. Over the course of the next three hours, the trio played pieces from its much praised album *Taking the Duke Out* (CDM 1001), a few "famous" tunes and several new ones from its upcoming release, *The Vampire's Revenge*

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Houston Person

almost felt like getting up to dance.”

They continued with a favorite from the Horace Silver book, “Strollin’.” In was taken at a medium tempo, perfect for the melodic improvisations it produced. Rosenthal and Person worked like hand and glove complementing each other throughout the performance. They produced a sound and feeling complete unto itself. I could not imagine anyone in the room thinking to themselves, “Too bad they don’t have bass and drums with them.”

The next selection “Be My Love” was a medium swinger with both participants taking long well developed soli. Rosenthal showed solo piano can swing in a subtle, yet powerful way. On this tune he showed his Bill Evans influence, weaving well-crafted lines punctuated by stabbing left hand chords and bass notes. The tune concluded with an extended tag with Person seemingly squeezing every ounce of sound out of his horn.

The last tune of the set was appropriately a blues. Rosenthal suggested the bebop staple “Au Privave.” Persons responded, “Fine, as long as you play the melody.” The pair were obviously enjoying each other and the small, but appreciative, crowd’s reception of their music. Rosenthal was masterful in his extemporization of the introduction and the tricky head. Person shined as his blues drenched melodies poured out in abundance. A rousing trading of 4’s brought the tune to a satisfying conclusion.

The room’s warm inviting feelings and scenic surroundings would make it worth the trip from anywhere in the New York area. This artistic jewel on Long Island deserves to have a larger audience considering the setting and their fine musical offerings.

Dave Liebman’s Quest Live at Birdland September 14-16, 2005

By Dan Adler

Once in a while you see a live performance that makes you think: “it doesn’t get any better than this!” Seeing the Quest reunion live at Bird-

land this week was such an experience. Dave Liebman and Richie Beirach’s long and fruitful association in the 70’s and 80’s was well-documented on many records (and recently issued as a compilation on Mosaic Records). It started with a group called “Lookout Farm,” continued with various duo recordings and culminated in the group called Quest with Ron McClure and Billy Hart which continued performing and recording until the early 90’s.

From the first note, the audience could tell that this was a very high-intensity group. They kicked off the set with a standard: Harry Warren’s “Summer Night” which was taken at a quick tempo with Dave Liebman on tenor. This was a pleasant surprise, given that he played soprano sax exclusively with the original Quest—and making it clear that this was not merely an evening of recreating the past. This was a reunion of star-quality players who, together, formed one of the most cohesive working groups of the post-Miles/Coltrane era.

The cohesiveness of the group was clearly not lost over the 10 years of not playing together. These four guys had an almost telepathic connection that was almost hard to believe. Billy Hart and Richie Beirach were constantly inserting surprising accents in perfect unison and cracking each other up. Ron McClure was picking up phrases from Liebman and then feeding them back to Beirach—sometimes you could listen to an idea get interpreted by each of them before moving on.

After a fiery start, Liebman changed the mood with a ballad he wrote called “Standoff” which he dedicated to the recent events in Israel. This was a beautiful and complex ballad which showed the sensitivity of these players. Billy Hart tasty drumming was a treat to watch, and Ron McClure was getting that bottom-heavy powerful tone reminiscent of Miles-era Ron Carter. During Beirach’s solo, we were reminded of that whole era when the ECM record label got started and that impressionistic sub-genre of jazz was invented—with Beirach as one of its most inno-

vative leaders.

The set continued with a Ron McClure original samba which featured an amazing bass solo and some of Beirach’s best piano moments of the evening—which had people in the audience cheering. Liebman’s playing was, of course, mesmerizing throughout the set. His sound on soprano is so distinctive, powerful and intense, and as I mentioned before, hearing him on tenor was an added bonus.

The group continued with two back-to-back compositions of Liebman and Beirach, both dedicated to the events of 9/11. These were two powerful pieces that started in a very free form with Liebman playing a wooden piccolo flute. Beirach started his composition with a long solo piano section that was unforgettable. At times, the compositions sounded free and at other times like contemporary classical music. Certainly, by the time they were done the audience had the feeling that something unique and perfect had unfolded before their eyes and ears.

To complete the set on a lighter note, Richie Beirach started a pedal-point figure that magically evolved into the standard “On Green Dolphin Street.” As you would expect with these guys—the song was reharmonized in different ways each time they played through it. Again,

Liebman, Beirach, McClure and Hart proved that all those years together allow them to plainly read each other’s mind and no matter how hard they tried to surprise each other with twists and turns—the other guys were always there to make it sound pre-conceived and resolve any tension. This level of group awareness and communication is not something you hear often. Each of them is a strong individual voice, but when they get together to play, you can hear that they are more concerned with the totality of the group’s musical statement than demonstrating their individual virtuosity.

As I said, this was one of those magical nights that

jazz fans long for. Too bad more people could not have been there at Birdland to enjoy this experience. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if Quest recorded a reunion album?



Dave Liebman