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The Semifinalists Live at Puppets Jazz Bar November 7, 2006

By *Dimitry Ekshtut*

One of the most popular and hotly-contested discussions at this year's annual conference of the International Association for Jazz Education was the debate over jazz's musical identity and relevance in our time. While no two people share the exact same definition of jazz, their versions ranging in diversity from strict bebop to all sorts of improvised music, we can all agree that in order to survive, jazz must do what it has always done — evolve with the times. In the sonic Petri dish that is the New York music scene, a young contingency of innovative experimentalists are slowly making their mark on and shaping the future of jazz music. Standing out among this myriad of talent is The Semifinalists, a cunningly hip quartet led by the nimble playing and shrewd compositional prowess of guitarist Dan Venne. Brooklyn's cozy Puppets Jazz Bar provided The Semifinalists with a laboratory-like setting in which to test and fine-tune its percolating concepts.

"Bear" began with a majestic combination of big, robust chords from Venne, the bowed bass of Scot Hornick, and effervescent mallet-work from drummer Sam Levin. Riding the rhythm section's crest, Heath Walton joined in on the tenor saxophone to play the intricate melody. Venne's compositional penchant for frequently changing time signatures made for an exciting and rhythmically diverse sound. Jazz musicians have long been experimenting with incorporating odd times in their music and the popularity of writing maze-like meter changes is at an all-time high. Only a handful do it with the finesse of The Semifinalists, a band that swings and grooves in any fraction and achieves a striking sense of suspended time. One of the few sections of "Bear" that remained consistently in 4/4 time featured a true-to-life fugue that found all four musicians intertwined in a dance of radiant melody.

Venne introduced "Delicious Bite-Size Morsels" by way of a solo chord melody crackling with a tone steeped in haunting beauty. Levin provided sympathetic strokes of his brushes while Walton's melody wafted through the room. Levin had switched to sticks by the time Walton's solo was underway and the two drove the energy ever upwards. The Semifinalists often mirrored the openness and playfulness of Pat Metheny's trio, while at other times echoing the structural ingenuity of Dave Holland's various projects. While these influences are certainly present, Venne was wise enough a composer to keep his own significant voice at the fore.

A band with a name like The Semifinalists seems fated to have a title tune. "The Semifinalists" is one of the band's strongest pieces and eloquently synthesizes the kind of musical aesthetic Venne, Walton, Hornick, and Levin are all about. Hornick's grooving Afro-Latin feel was all the more astounding as it was comprised entirely of double stops. Levin entered with a like-minded drum groove, followed soon after by a chromatic, off-kilter melody in unison from Venne and Walton. On a dime, a metric modulation shifted the entire song to a slower and even deeper, funkier groove above which the melody was cleverly readjusted and refitted. The subdivision of the beat kept changing throughout the song, constantly creating a new basis for grooves. On a fast, swinging feel, Walton wailed away, bending in and out of notes with real emotion. Hornick and Levin must be credited with authoritatively holding down each and every groove and seamlessly transitioning between them all. They both displayed a remarkable ability to abruptly change the type of energy their music was exuding while sustaining its high level.

Venne's classical side emerged again on "11.5," a composition that captured the transparency and clarity that Venne's classical training allows him to bring to his music and which allowed plenty of space for the rhythmic complexity of his ideas. A peaceful, soothing energy caressed the music as Venne lightly arpeggiated chords while Walton doubled the top, melody line. Walton's big, bold tone had plenty of juice in it for a strong solo. Levin turned off the snare and utilized the toms extensively for his drum solo, capturing an earthy quality that complimented Venne's designs.

"Grizzle" featured more raw energy and dissonance than Venne's other compositions. Walton's tenor sax and Venne's guitar were by design set at odds, resulting in a captivating friction and melodic tension between the two that relented only slightly for each other's solos and more fully as they transitioned to pre-composed interludes. A frenetic solo by Walton capitalized on the tune's great energy and led perfectly into a hard-grooving final section punctuated by Levin's ferocious drumming.

An inventive and adventurous harmonic structure distinguished "Reformation," a slower tune in three with extra beats tacked on now and then. Like other compositions in their repertoire, The Semi-

finalists contracted, stretched, and skewed the beat into a succession of grooves. Walton built up a fervent improvisation whose energy grew to its logical climax, only to come down for a drum solo and rise again with Venne's unaccompanied reintroduction of the melody. "Salute to the Sandbox" reiterated Venne's fresh vocabulary of chords and voicings that often utilize open strings, tonal clusters, and smaller intervals rubbing against each other. Undulating between a regular and half-time feel, the band also forayed deep into the corresponding triplet pulse. The constant modulations, so well executed, created a sense of temporal lightness that made The Semifinalists appear to float above the tune's complex rhythmic underpinning. Hornick joined Venne in unison against the drums while Walton took a solo, the two then hitting upon a polyrhythmic vamp for Levin's fluid solo.

Mashing up styles and breaking down musical barriers, The Semifinalists demand and deserve attentive listening. The success of this experimental music lies predominantly with Venne's composition gems. Difficult to read on the page but highly enjoyable in The Semifinalists' capable hands, these intricate tunes and their effects upon the musicians' approach to their improvisation are indicative of the one thing jazz truly values and respects most — an individual voice with something worthwhile to say.

Anat Fort Birdland March 13, 2007

By *Dan Adler*

Personnel: Anat Fort (Piano, Leader); Perry Robinson (Clarinet), Ed Schuller (Bass); Roland Schneider (Drums)

This special evening at Birdland was a CD release party for Anat Fort's debut release on ECM. The new CD, "A Long Story", features Paul Motian, and is comprised entirely of her original compositions, with one joint effort between Fort and Perry Robinson. Unfortunately, Paul Motian could not appear at this live performance, but his shoes were more than adequately filled by Fort's regular working trio drummer, Roland Schneider.

Pianist Anat Fort (www.anatfort.com) was born in Israel and began her classical music education there at the age of five. Her early attraction to improvisation and interest in jazz ultimately led to a summer session at the Eastman School of Music and enrollment in the jazz program at William Paterson University. While there, she started composing and continued to perform different styles under the guidance of jazz notables Rufus Reid, Norman Simmons, Harold Mabern and Vic Juris. Upon graduation, Anat moved to New York and studied classical composition with Harold Seletsky and improvisation



with Paul Bley, further reinforcing her diverse musical inclinations. Anat's 1999 debut CD containing original compositions, "Peel", was followed by the formation of the Anat Fort Trio with bassist Gary Wang and drummer Roland Schneider.

The room at Birdland was filled to capacity with fans and well-wishers buzzing about until the first sounds of Birdland's excellent Bösendorfer piano filled the room. The trio opened the evening with the song "Morning: Good" from the new CD. From that first moment on, the audience was completely silent, almost in a trance as the relaxing sounds of Anat Fort's music told a long story of dreams and lullabies and took them on journeys to far-away deserts.

The second song in the set, "Just Now" is a beautiful minor melody which almost sounds like an Israeli folk song. On the CD, this song appears in three different variations. At the performance, Anat started it off on her own, and developed a beautiful dialog with bassist Ed Schuller, whose powerful sound and constant flow of ideas carried the music to new heights. Roland Schneider joined in with brushes and some rubato group improvisation developed.

Group improvisation was also the theme on "Rehired". Taken at a faster tempo, the angular theme quickly turned into an imaginative drum solo by Schneider, and then, just as you might expect it to go back to swing, Ed Schuller took a long "free" bass solo on his own to the audience's delight and applause. Anat Fort's piano solo was virtuosic and full of twists and turns and developed into more of a group statement than a solo. She left a lot of space in her lines which allowed the other group members to react creatively and gave the whole piece a relaxed flowing feel.

Perry Robinson made his entrance playing an Ocarina on "Something About Camels", an ancient flute-like instrument that dates back thousands of years. Anat Fort asked the audience to close their eyes and imagine that they can see a camel, which I think we all did, with the help of Robinson's Ocarina whistling together with Roland Schneider's imaginative percussion work.

It was interesting to see how the group could go from the classic ECM relaxed melodic sound to the most free and atonal extremes without ever losing the audience. This was especially evident during Robinson's solo clarinet feature, and later when Fort and Robinson played an improvised duet where they were almost reading each other's mind even though there was no apparent structure or set tempo to the piece. "Not a Dream?" was another 'free' piece that started and ended with a simple melody based on a two-note motif, but then kept changing moods and getting more and more loose and complex before returning to the simple theme.

The evening closed with one of Fort's most memorable compositions "Lullaby" which started with a beautiful unaccompanied bass solo by Ed Schuller. The haunting bluesy theme reminded me of Keith Jarrett's "My Song" album, with Robinson taking an exquisitely melodic solo that had elements of

klezmer clarinet and some humorous quotes which he built to an exciting climax. Fort's piano solo continued to build on the early Keith Jarrett vibe established by the group, and she kept developing exciting melodic ideas over the relatively simple harmonic structure. The live version of this tune was even more satisfying than the much shorter version on the CD as it gave these excellent musicians a chance to really stretch out and left the audience with the feeling of a happy ending to a long story.

Mamiko Watanabe
Thursday, March 15, 2007
Kitano Hotel

By Joe Knipes

On a drizzly evening in mid-March, I had the pleasure of listening to a fabulous pianist and her trio, in comfortable surroundings, while enjoying a terrific meal. The lounge at Kitano seats about 45 patrons in a tight, but comfortably arranged lounge on the mezzanine of this modern hotel. Located in the Murray Hill section of Manhattan, the bar looks out over Park Avenue. Proprietor Gino Moratti makes you feel right at home with a smile as he shows you to your seat. I chose a light meal for my dinner, which consisted of the Asian Chicken Salad, washed down with a Brooklyn lager — a fine match, and highly recommended. The only thing left to do was to relax and get down to enjoying the sounds of Mamiko Watanabe, Massimo Biolcati, and Ferenc Nemeth. Mamiko introduced herself, and the pianist's quiet demeanor belies her powerful approach to the keys, as I was soon to discover.

This first set began with an original composition by Watanabe. "A Veil of Secrecy" is an up-tempo piece, with an arrangement that allowed for comments from the bass and drums. It was right into 4/4 swing for Watanabe's first solo of the night, where she took her time, being careful not to clutter things up at the beginning. Strong communication between Biolcati and Nemeth emerged while the two were engaged in egging the pianist on. Mamiko left plenty of space to allow things to happen, and I was immediately drawn to Nemeth's provocative yet tasteful drum work. A montuno gave way to a vamp figure, over which Nemeth unfurled polyrhythms and employed an aggressive volume that was not the least bit unwelcome in the low-profile room.

Next, the pianist set up what she calls her "favorite Jazz standard" with a Latin vamp. On this performance of "Here's That Rainy Day", Watanabe let loose some pentatonic McCoy-flavored runs over this vamp, her right hand slightly arpeggiating the chords, which added a lush quality to the opening segment. Her arrangement once again generously assigned hits and fills to her supportive counterparts. Nemeth was right in synch with Watanabe's left hand while her right danced freely across the keys. Bassist Biolcati took a strong solo with a big, woody

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