

JAZZ AT ETUDES

Donny McCaslin Quartet
Starbird Music Hall, Portland
February 26, 2005

There are people who love lists and those who suffer through them. Donny McCaslin must love lists. Mr. McCaslin has the privilege of frequent appearance on “Five Top Tenor Players In Their Thirties” lists (in the rarified company of such artists as Joshua Redman, Chris Potter, Eric Alexander and Mark Turner). He brought an powerhouse quartet to Portland for a recital at the Starbird hall, and it was easy to see how he landed on so many lists: Mr. McCaslin is a broad-ranging composer and a tenor-saxophonic athlete of the highest order, no more and no less.

The featured sideman was the outstanding guitarist Ben Monder, who made a fascinating physical match for Mr. McCaslin. Each stood well over six feet, thin and garbed in black. Physically Mr. McCaslin resembled a younger relation of the novelist Steven King. Ironically, the writer and the player have opposing strengths: Mr. King is celebrated for his ceaseless imagination but occasionally disparaged for his lack of artistic refinement; Mr. McCaslin’s technique is prodigious but his story-telling seemed more developed in his compositions than in his improvisations.

The evening was a snapshot of New York jazz in this post-millennial decade. The band members came to The Big City from around the globe: Mr. McCaslin from California, guitarist Monder from New York state, double-bassist Bruno Råberg from the Kingdom of Sweden and percussionist Marcello Pellitieri from Italy. Covering a wide variety of time-feels in even and mixed-meter, this ensemble was ready to turn on a dime and did so often. Over the course of the evening the band touched on an angular, modal two-beat (Strange Pilgrim), extensive mixed-meter explorations (B-Love in 7/4 and The Way Through, with a melody mixing 6/4 and 5/4), free improvisation (The Way Through again), ECM-style ballad (Grafton), funky back-beat (Hermeto) and even a tune with a second-line/Bo Diddley beat. Taken as a whole, Mr. McCaslin’s compositional book is deep and wide-ranging and reflects serious work over time.

Like his list-mate Mark Turner, Mr. McCaslin displayed a complete command of the altissimo register on tenor – simply put, he’s got an octave that’s not built into the horn seamlessly integrated into every phrase. Mr. McCaslin played with evident emotion, bobbing and shifting his stance. Oddly, though, the physical display of passion was disconnected from the actual musical content – the solos resembled a classicist’s deeply-felt rendering of an etude. I don’t mean to say that Mr. McCaslin planned or mapped his solos, but rather that each phrase felt like some thing which he had conjured up in the practice-room and transported directly to the stage.

The tenor saxophone tradition is characterized by players who developed and displayed a personal language. From Ben Webster’s lift to Pharaoh Sanders’ ecstatic quavers to Wayne Shorter’s slippery slopes, the masters of the tenor horn have always coupled a unique sound with some amount of personalized text. But even the few who criticized John Coltrane for his seemingly endless improvisations acknowledged that his trademark sheets of sound appeared, unbidden and hard-wrought, in the moment. Similarly, even those who denigrate the current

tenor monarch for his occasional Brecker-isms do not go so far as to claim that he assembles his work in advance. There is no doubt that Mr. McCaslin has developed a highly-evolved language – his technical fluency is simply astounding. But line after line, minute after minute of studied work still missed the freshness and immediacy which is the hallmark of the jazz idiom at its finest. As the writer Thomas Conrad phrased it, “The quality of immediacy . . . originates, not from the assumption that the notes have never been played before, but from a sense that they have come into being, in real time, as urgent creative impulses.” The distinction between passionate display and deeply-felt improvisation may be subtle but it is essential to the appreciation of jazz music. At least on this one evening in Portland, Mr. McCaslin’s tenor stylings reflected the former to the detriment of the latter.

The bandleader went through a nuanced but substantive shift each time he moved to soprano saxophone. On The Way Through, Mr. McCaslin’s freely-improvised playing off Marcello Pellitieri’s tambourine was considerably more melodic and in-the-moment, even in its busiest sections, than the material which preceded it. Similarly, on the final composition (a fast, yet-to-be-titled piece), Mr. McCaslin delivered a standout, highly-intentional soprano improvisation and closed, at last, with some slow, thoughtful playing on the tenor horn.

Mr. Monder’s performance throughout the evening was in sharp contrast to his employer’s. The guitarist employed the full panoply of effects and gizmos, but always harnessed to the music and the moment. Much of Mr. Monder’s time in the spotlight was spent playing post-modern chord-melodies. From his abstract, distortion-laced lines on B-Love to his post-modern take on Bo Diddley later in the evening, Mr. Monder projected constant exploration and chance-taking, seeking out the next instant’s chord-melody, line or sound. It is a modest irony that on an instrument all-too-often associated with pyrotechnic display, Mr. Monder’s performance reached the highest levels both of musical restraint and musical investigation. Best yet, his performance was matched throughout the evening by Marcello Pellitieri’s drumming and hand-percussion stylings. The Italian’s constantly-shifting performances brought to mind the work of Billy Cobham during his early days as a more acoustic performer (behind a more compact kit).

Donny McCaslin is an outstanding player with a band and a book that I would be happy to see again. That said and meant, we can only wonder how long he will remain on the lists of players close to bringing a musical voice to full fruition.