

Keeping At It: Jorge Sylvester's Group Perseveres

By: Glenn Siegel Jazz Ruminations

Jazz Shares.org

Some shows are easier to produce than others. The concert at Hawks & Reed on March 4, featuring Jorge Sylvester Spontaneous Expressions, landed on one end of the spectrum. First there was the looming winter storm warning that threatened to dump a foot of snow on Greenfield (it ended early and amounted to much less than 12 inches.) Days before the gig, the band's pianist, Kuba Cichocki, got COVID. On Wednesday, Amtrak canceled their scheduled train. A half-hour out of New York, their new train lost power and didn't move for two hours. Instead of a leisurely meal and some downtime, we zipped straight from the Springfield train station to the venue, arriving at 6:50pm for a 7:30pm show. If that wasn't enough, the bass drum pedal was faulty.

I'm not sure if the stress made the music sweeter, but there was certainly a sense of relief when the first note sounded, only 15 minutes later than usual. The ensemble, led by alto saxophonist Jorge Sylvester, featured vocalist Nora McCarthy, drummer Tony Moreno, and last minute replacement Bruce Arnold on guitar.

The set began with a solo by Sylvester, using Monk's "Epistrophy" as his point of departure. It served as a wonderful introduction to his sly improvising and full bodied tone. As the evening unfolded, Sylvester proceeded to break the quartet into various duos and trios, giving us a chance to really hone in on each player; maybe half the concert featured the full group. He employed a similar strategy on his latest release, *Mayhem At Large*, a live concert recording featuring eight players, but only two octet pieces; the rest were duos and solos.

The evening's 80-minute set was plenty experimental, featuring lots of open improvisation that only hinted at predictable harmony and rhythm. That was true even when the band invoked tunes such as "Peace". McCarthy sang Horace Silver's beautiful lyrics and melody while the rest of the ensemble alluded to the form with accents and embellishments.

The Panamanian-born Sylvester, now 70, has been plugging away at his craft since boyhood, mentored by fellow countrymen, Euclides Hall, Efrain Castro and Victor Boa. After earning a music degree from SUNY New Paltz in 1981, he had impactful experiences at Karl Berger's legendary Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, NY, where he first made contact with Dave Holland, Oliver Lake and violinist Ramsey Ameen, who became an important collaborator. Career stops have included tours with the World Saxophone Quartet, work with Andrew Cyrille, Craig Harris and the poet Sekou Sundiata (check out *The Blue Oneness of Dreams*), and numerous recordings as a leader. His first Jazz Shares appearance in 2015 with his ACE Collective, took place at Northampton's Parlor Room.

Nora McCarthy's role in the group brought to mind vocalists like Phil Minton, Maggie Nichols and Lauren Newton, who don't just croon on a bed of sound, but are instrumentalists actually embedded in the ensemble, comping, improvising, interacting like all the other musicians. Her alto voice was sometimes out front singing lyrics, but could also be heard wordlessly blending with a background guitar figure or trading rhythms with drums. The morning after the concert she regaled us with stories about singing background vocals in Wilson Pickett's band as a young person. McCarthy is not only a long-time collaborator of Sylvester's, they're life partners.

Sylvester also has a long relationship with Tony Moreno, the veteran drummer who has worked with Frank Kimbrough, Ole Mathisen and Marc Mommas. There was a sureness of touch, a confidence in his playing that comes from a lifetime behind the kit. Born in Manhattan, Moreno was mentored by Elvin Jones, who sold him his first drum set. Moreno studied with him for six years at Frank Ippolito's Professional Percussion Center, where he also became friends with Mel Lewis, Tony Williams, Gene Krupa and Billy Cobham. Moreno told us the heartbreaking story of losing equipment, all his instruments (including a Yamaha C6 grand piano and a drum kit owned by Papa Jo Jones), and his mother's music library, including manuscripts dating back to the 15th century, in Hurricane Sandy. Despite the hardship, Moreno exuded a zest for music and the people who make it.

Moreno also suggested adding Bruce Arnold to the band. The two have been collaborating for over 15 years. They shared a basement studio at Westbeth, the legendary complex of artist housing, gallery, studio and performance space in the West Village, that was devastated by the hurricane in 2012. I didn't know Arnold before last week, another example of the depth of musical talent that escapes even attentive listeners like me. Arnold is a prolific author and educator (Berklee, NYU, Princeton), who has 300 books, videos and apps on music theory, time studies, ear training, guitar technique and more. He can also play the guitar at the highest level in many styles.

Overcoming obstacles and enduring neglect seems to define the jazz journey of many. Like Jorge Sylvester and the members of his band, those that make it develop a resilience and resourcefulness that results in hard earned brilliance.