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Jazz review: Angel City Jazz Festival at the Ford Amphitheatre

October 2, 2011 | 3:25 pm



"Does anyone have a pick? Our bass player seems to have lost his pick," young saxophonist Warren Walker of the Kandinsky Effect said from the stage Saturday night, midway through the Angel City Jazz Festival at the John Anson Ford Amphitheatre.

Hands shot up in the crowd before a man in the ninth row earned cheers (and bows of gratitude) for walking up the aisle to rescue the Paris-based trio. Kandinsky Effect then continued its set of bracing,

electronically tweaked jazz reminiscent of the bent funk-rock of the influential genre-mashing Seattle band Critters Buggin.

While this kind of thing could inspire some predictable dismissal of jazz as the music for musicians among ill-informed nonbelievers, it was just part of the warmly convivial spirit of the Angel City Jazz Festival, a rich and ambitious gathering now in its third year at the intimate, woodsy confines of the Ford.

Photo gallery: Angel City Jazz Festival at the John Anson Ford Amphitheatre

Offering a diverse, multi-act menu of artists at the front edge of jazz in one of the city's top settings, the festival's "Global Jam" theme was in full flower for this date, the sixth out of seven nights that also featured artists from Australia, Colombia and West Africa.

Led by saxophonist Michael Session, L.A.'s own Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra set the tone with a rollicking set that continued a 50-year legacy of incubating for creative music that rose out of Leimert Park in the '60s. After touching on the works of the late founder Horace Tapscott, as well as a rambunctious turn with Charles Mingus' "Moanin'," the Ark peaked with the addition of a joyful 10-piece choir directed by Dwight Tribble.

Between Tribble's soulful and roomy excursions and the otherworldly twists by a singer who goes only by the name Maia on "Little Africa," the gathering of more than 20 musicians forged a path through gospel, soul, avant-jazz and brassy, big band swing.



The Japanese husband-wife duo of pianist Satoko Fujii and trumpeter Natsuki Tamura opted for a more atmospheric, spacious approach. With Tamura alternately crumpling his tone into a murmur or lifting it

to a brilliant shine to play off Fujii's intense keyboard expressions, the improvisations of the duo easily meshed with the occasional birdcall and even the low-flying thrum of a passing helicopter before coalescing into something akin to a deconstructed ragtime funeral march.

In maybe the most startling moment of musical cross-pollination, 24-year-old pianist Tigran Hamasyan stole the night with an infectious, energetic set. Hamasyan, who was born in Armenia but raised in L.A. after turning 16, found previously undiscovered land between Armenian folk, breakneck bop and sparks of progressive rock with a nimble quintet that featured Ben Wendel and Nate Wood from Kneebody.

Hamasyan released a solo recording as his major label debut in February, but with a full band his approach took on new power with unique hybrids such as "Shogher Jan," which featured a knotty, Eastern melody that whiplashed through multiple shifts in time and tone as Hamasyan's acrobatic piano merged with Wendel's soprano saxophone and the lush, near-operatic vocals of Areni Agbabian.

With Hamasyan's head-spinning piano attack playing off a fuzzed-out electric bass from Sam Minaie and Wood's off-center drive on drums, the quintet sounded unlike anything else in a powerful performance that felt like the arrival of a talent to be reckoned with.

New York-based saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa picked up the thread of East-West interplay with his electric new ensemble Samdhi, which at times recalled the explorations of John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra, except with an alto saxophone at the helm.

With head-spinning precision, Mahanthappa captured an elastic sort of South Indian fusion on "Killer" and "Playing With Stones" with an air-tight rhythm section and the nimble, echoing guitar of David Gilmore (not to be confused with that David Gilmour, but the blues-dusted flourishes of the Pink Floyd guitarist were present in spirit).

It was a diverse, tough-to-define yet still rewarding finish to a night of jazz that could sound like another world yet still be part of something bigger. As part of a sprawling, eclectic city that can often be described in much the same way, Angel City couldn't have a more fitting home.

[For the record Oct. 3: An earlier version of this post misidentified a singer who performed with the Pan Afrikan People's Arkestra as Maria. Her performing name is spelled Maia.]

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-- Chris Barton