



Is there decent jazz in Dallas? We found out at new City Performance Hall

The Dallas Jazz Collective plays an impressive set but struggles with acoustics in the new Arts District theater.

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Published: 16 September 2012 09:19 PM

The second night of City Performance Hall's grand opening weekend addressed two very different questions. The first was easy enough: Is there decent jazz in Dallas?

In a perfect world, the answer would be obvious. But like most non-European cities, Dallas isn't ga-ga about jazz, so its deep pool of talented players often struggle to find fans and places to play.

That wasn't a problem Saturday night as the Dallas Jazz Collective strut its considerable stuff for a respectable-size crowd in the 750-seat theater. A new ensemble led by saxophonist Jason Davis, the Collective showcased more than 20 stellar musicians in an unpredictable, far-flung set

The show opened with sublime electric guitar work from Lucky Peterson, who's a bluesman, not a jazz player. But veteran musician Wendell Sneed put it into perspective, explaining "I don't think there'd be jazz if it weren't for the blues."

From there, it was all over the map, from an ever-shifting "Over the Rainbow" to a version of Roy Hargrove's "Liquid Streets" to Damon K. Clark's gorgeous take on Van Morrison's "Moondance." All of the singers burned brightly, including Candino Newman, Cherish Love, Candace "Mahogany" Miller and Tatiana Mayfield, who sang "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" and somehow made you forget all about Ella Fitzgerald's version. Another stand-out was deep-voiced Victor Cager, who took "Fly Me to the Moon" from a whispery dirge into finger-popping swing.

The instrumentalists soared as well, especially Roger Boykin on lickety-split piano, and the hard-driving horn section featuring alto sax player Aaron Irwinsky, trombonist Tony Baker and trumpeter Mike Shields. The drummers -- Mike Mitchell, Lamont Taylor and Andrew Griffith -- raised some serious hell during a pair of manic solos.

The second question -- how does the new theater sound? -- was a bit trickier. City Performance Hall was built with music in mind, and it's already earned rave reviews for the acoustics at Friday night's rock-folk-gospel extravaganza featuring Sarah Jaffe and others.

But the sound Saturday was a mixed bag. The acoustics were perfect when there was no clutter --- like during Davis' Coltrane-style sax soliloquy. But with more than ten amplified musicians often playing at once, the sound often got bogged down in bass and drums, making it difficult to hear the singers.

That's not a theater flaw, but a hard lesson in the inexact science of loudspeakers: The smallish house speakers hanging above the stage and to its sides simply weren't enough for this particular concert.

It was also reminder that even a venue that cost \$40.5 million still needs fine-tuning to make it sound like a million bucks.

Thor Christensen is a Dallas freelance writer.

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