

Billy Hart Quintet at The Rubin Museum of Art

The Billy Hart Academy - Published: July 13, 2008

The Billy Hart Academy featuring Theo Croker
The Rubin Museum of Art / JVC Jazz Festival
New York, New York
June 20, 2008

The Billy Hart Academy's outstanding show, on a Friday evening at New York's Rubin Museum of Himalayan Art as part of the 2008 JVC Jazz Festival, confirmed the best aspects of both the players and the celebrated music festival that began at Newport. Hart's storied prowess as a drummer has, in recent years, been rivaled by his contribution as a jazz educator (when not pursuing his busy touring schedule, Hart has taught at a number of prestigious conservatories and institutions of higher learning). Jazz education, like the art form it advances, requires a delicate balance of theory and execution; in that spirit, performances by Hart's "Academy," a free-floating collective in which Hart periodically assembles talented younger musicians who were once his students, provide ample evidence that the drummer is systematically passing along his unique blend of cerebral conviction and muscular musicianship.

Of late, Theo Croker has been queuing up behind Jeremy Pelt for the title of New York's "upcoming new trumpet sensation," and on this evening he enjoyed headliner billing just below Hart's. The young man backs up his rep, as his meaty, hard-punching lines and big sound make it impossible not to sit up and take notice. Croker has begun playing at the Rubin on a regular basis with a variety of line-ups, and the museum's warm, wood-paneled performance space and "Harlem in the Himalayas" jazz series provide an optimal launching-pad for this enormously gifted and personable horn-player.

On this evening, the ensemble led off with "Dance Cadaverous," a Wayne Shorter number that no doubt was the first encounter of many in the audience with the fine young players on the stage. Hart's subtle and evocative brush-work gave an effervescent charm to the opening passage, even before Irwin Hall's extended flute solo, which Hart drove forward with his cymbal work. It was clear from the first that the combo benefited from the foundation provided by a fully-engaged rhythm section, with pianist Sullivan Fortner never backing down from his percussive support on the keys. Fortner has a McCoy Tyner-like ability to fill the spaces behind a horn player's solo and then step forward with musical insights of his own. The pianist's coloristic chords, combined with Hart's artistry and the seamless bass lines of Marcos Varelos, wrapped the music in a satisfying rhythmic package.

The Austrian composer Fritz Pauer's "Fairytale Countryside" was next on the agenda, and reedman Hall switched from flute, on which he seemed somewhat

tentative, to alto saxophone, on which he proved masterful. In fact, the evening was something of an "I-Have-Arrived" moment for Hall, whose intelligent, rapid-fire alto solos were among the show's most delectable offerings. The Pauer number was followed by Charlie Parker's tune "Ah Leu Cha," with alto, trumpet and tenor players all contributing to the rousing bop choruses.

Marcello Tonolo's "Dream" came next; toward the end of this number, Hart abruptly cut short a drum solo, as though to acknowledge that the evening belonged first and foremost to the rising young players sharing the stage with him. He then introduced his own "Lullaby For Imke Greer Ralista," during which he finally allowed himself an extended drum cadenza, unleashing a clattering cyclone of rich percussive textures that are his signature.

The set was growing long at this point, but neither band members nor audience showed any impatience for a finale ("We've already played much longer than they do at those more expensive shows, " Hart confided to the rapt auditorium.) And although the evening was waning, the group generously provided one final treat with Bill Lee's "John Coltrane," an homage that included the three hornsmen's mantra-like intonations in the style of *A Love Supreme* (Impulse!, 1964). Tenor player Patrick Brainer, perhaps inspired by his instrument's great avatar, launched into a solo whose ferocious intensity left the audience whooping with approval. Indeed, the closing number proved an ideal end to an event that moved from the artful to the inspirational, and that became in the process a soul-soothing fusion of the aesthetic and the spiritual, a covenant passed along to a new generation of believers.

And keeping that faith is what Billy Hart's music and mission are about.