



Metromix Chicago Home

Hyde Park fest brings jazz home

By Howard Reich

It may have been the fastest 14 hours in jazz -- as well as the most inspiring.

From 11 a.m. Saturday to the small hours of Sunday morning, a single Chicago neighborhood transformed itself into what Duke Ellington used to call "the city of jazz."

You could hear the music echoing on the streets; you could savor it in concert halls and courtyards; you could feel it pulsing in the steps of listeners hustling to shows.

If the first annual Hyde Park Jazz Festival looked promising on paper, it proved even more effective in reality than its planners could have envisioned. No one predicted the massive, turn-away crowds that queued up for every indoor show.

It was as if, in a single stroke, a new cultural institution had emerged in Chicago, with 5,000-plus embracing the free sets. Not bad for an event that the University of Chicago, the Hyde Park Cultural Alliance and the Hyde Park Jazz Society had spent less than a year (and less than \$120,000) creating.

Here is a diary:

11:14 a.m., DuSable Museum of African American History. Who knew if anyone would come out so early to hear the ultimate music of the night -- jazz? Yet here they are, pouring into the DuSable's gorgeous auditorium as Chicago trumpeter Orbert Davis conducts a workshop for youngsters.

12:11 p.m., DuSable Museum. Davis leads his quintet in exuberant performances of several jazz classics, producing characteristically brilliant trumpet solos in "Softly, As in a Morning Sunrise," with comparably searing statements from saxophonist Ari Brown and pianist Ryan Cohan. While the band plays, listeners page through the festival's ultrasleek, 52-page program booklet, which puts to shame the ragged handout at the bigger, older Chicago Jazz Festival.

2:09 p.m., Midway Plaisance. Drummer Charles "Rick" Heath and his band struggle with the booming sound at the Midway's skating rink, which has been converted into a makeshift jazz arena. Yet there's no resisting the terpsichorean gifts of tap dancer Jumaane Taylor.

2:40 p.m., Quadrangle Club. The glorious Chicago singer Dee Alexander is riffing as if possessed by the spirit of Ella Fitzgerald. Yet Alexander's free-flying scat looks forward, not back, the vocalist inventing sounds never uttered before.

3:29 p.m., Smart Museum of Art. Reginald T. McCants' smooth-jazz pianism is an acquired taste that at least one listener does not seek to acquire. But the quaint courtyard setting, with kids playing amid the leaves, provides delightful distractions.

3:45 p.m., Midway Plaisance. You can hear the incendiary Bill McFarland & the Chicago Horns from at least two blocks away, their declamations heralding ever more listeners.

4:26 p.m., Quadrangle Club. "We're excited, but we're scared to death," Mwata Bowden tells the capacity crowd as he introduces his University of Chicago Jazz X-tet.

Considering that this year's student band was assembled just five days earlier, the terror is understandable

but unnecessary. No train wrecks occur.

5:12 p.m., Robie House. The crowds have been so large for this show by Two for Brazil that an extra set has been added. Singer-guitarist Paulinho Garcia and saxophonist Greg Fishman never have sounded more subtly insinuating than in Frank Lloyd Wright's lovingly enveloping space.

8:02 p.m., Hyde Park Art Center. A crushing, sometimes scary-size crowd has packed the place to relish a plaintive "Round Midnight" from veteran saxophonist Jimmy Ellis; soulful duets between sisters Maggie Brown and Africa Brown; galvanic pianism from Willie Pickens; and flame-throwing improvisations from trumpeter Corey Wilkes.

1:20 a.m. Sunday, Checkerboard Lounge. Lines are still forming for a series of jam sessions. The good news for those who don't stick around: Just 51 weeks till next year's event.

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