Arts & Humanities

Columbia Jazz Ensemble

By
Urania Mylonas ’97JRN
|
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It was a quiet Sunday afternoon on upper Broadway, but at Smoke, the jazz club, the house was packed, and the crowd was warm. Between the final note of “The Soulful Mr. Timmons” and a round of thunderous applause, a lone voice called out, “That was sweet. Real sweet!” The piece, a tribute by jazz pianist and longtime jazz educator James Williams to the ’60s Blue Note artist Bobby Timmons, launched a set that would run for another two and a half hours.

Such grooves are typical for the Columbia Jazz Ensemble, nine undergraduate and graduate students directed by Assistant Professor Chris Washburne ’99GSAS, but tonight also promised something new. Billed as “Jazz Meets Hip-Hop,” the show included guest vocalist Akil Dasan ’03CC, who delivered a jazz-inspired hip-hop message with his original composition “You So Fly,” and David Gudis ’03CC, also a guest, who displayed his human beat-box virtuosity on another tune. Ensemble composers showcased new work as well. Bassist Paul Steinbeck, a second-year doctoral candidate in music theory and a Chicago native, offered his composition “Wadada,” honoring Wadada Leo Smith, an early member of Chicago’s Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, a school and workshop founded in 1965.

Washburne, a trombonist who has toured with Tito Puente ’99HON, Eddie Palmieri, and Gloria Estefan, among others, is currently working to take the ensemble on tour in Europe. He talks to his students at length about what it’s like to perform here and abroad. “The first thing I tell them each morning is how much money I made the night before—they’re astounded by how little it is,” he laughs.

The ensemble’s gig at Smoke was made possible through the efforts of Columbia’s Center for Jazz Studies. Founded by Zora Neale Hurston Professor of English and Comparative Literature Robert O’Meally in 1999 with the help of the Music

Department and the financial backing of the Louis Armstrong Foundation, the Center has expanded to offer 12 classes, attended by one out of eight students in Columbia College as well as by students in other schools within the University. The enrollment for Washburne's jazz course is one of the largest in the music department's history, with 225 students. During a lecture last spring, he darted from one end of the room to the other, playing various recorded versions of the Cuban classic "The Peanut Vendor," and explaining how Louis Armstrong reinterpreted it in the late 1920s. Armstrong didn't know Spanish; when he came to the word for peanut, "mani," the master improviser substituted the name "Marie" and scatted his way through the rest.

On most Sunday nights, the professor can be found at Smoke, playing with his Latin jazz band, SYOTOS (for See You On The Other Side), and his students are more than likely either playing with him or listening in the audience. "In addition to nurturing more jazz musicians, we're hoping to help develop a future jazz fan base," he explains.

Ensemble members are hooked on Washburne's enthusiasm and candor, and they're unafraid of his exacting attention to craft or the work he demands of them. "Chris expects us to be professionals and treats us in a like manner," says guitarist Benjamin Fried-Cassorla '04CC. "I realized that one day when we'd read a chart down perfectly, hitting all the notes. But he reminded us that we hadn't yet addressed the dynamic markings or articulations—a whole other level of music-making."

Members of the Columbia Jazz Ensemble are Niko Higgins, a doctoral candidate in music, on alto saxophone, Adam Keilman '04CC on tenor and soprano saxophones, Daniel Tannenbaum '05CC on trombone, Ben Fried-Cassorla on guitar, Victor Lin, a doctoral candidate, on piano, Paul Steinbeck on bass, Justin Padro '04CC on drums, James Morehead '04CC, and Alex Kontorovich '06GSAS.

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