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The Insiders Take It Out

The SFJAZZ Collective may be great, but is it good enough to tackle Ornette Coleman?

BY SAM PRESTIANNI

Joshua Redman's five-year stint as artistic director for SFJAZZ's spring season has turned out to be a sweet gig. Not only does the celebrated saxophonist now have the clout to book an unprecedented number of jazz's top new-school innovators on the same program with veteran pioneers, but he's also been given the green light -- and the cash money -- to put together a resident band, the SFJAZZ Collective, to explore both original tunes and still-relevant music by the giants of the genre.

However, unlike the average repertory ensemble that goes way back, dusting off scores by popular composers from the swing and bebop eras for middle-of-the-road audiences, this ambitious octet is drawing from the revolutionary developments of the late '50s onward. What's more, the Collective, largely comprising younger-generation, mainstream hotshots -- Redman (tenor sax), Nicholas Payton (trumpet), Miguel Zenón (alto sax), Josh Roseman (trombone), Renee Rosnes (piano), Robert Hurst (bass), Brian Blade (drums), and Bobby Hutcherson (vibes) -- chose to mark its debut with a daring act: by taking on the dicey works of Ornette Coleman, the free-jazz trailblazer aptly billed on SFJAZZ's concert calendar as "The Maverick Master."

Of course, all this sounds promising, but it raises an important question: Will a group of technically proficient insiders be able to do justice to Coleman's numinous compositions and really take them *out*, as originally intended, far beyond the dots, lines, and squiggles on the staff paper? Jazz of the outermost dimensions not only blurs the lines between improv and composition, expectation and outcome, but it also works on a kind of indefinable higher plane, where vision or spirituality -- something bigger than the players themselves -- takes over. Is this group up for the task?

Redman is well aware of the unique challenges of getting this project off the ground. "With Ornette's music, perhaps more than anyone else's," he explains in a phone interview following the group's first rehearsal in the cushy setting of Kanbar Hall at the recently renovated Jewish Community Center, "it's not about the notes that are written on the page; it's really about the spirit and the vibe. ... There's no way to communicate what that is in words."

Indeed, Coleman's vision, legendary in the storied history of jazz, is tough to nail down. More than four decades ago, the saxophonist rocked the hard-bop establishment with a brazen departure from the convention of improvising on a melody over predetermined chord changes and a standard backbeat. His fundamental concept, which he eventually called "harmolodics," is so complex that even after all this time many knowledgeable folks still can't articulate what it is or how it works.

"Some people describe it as a pretty hefty theoretical system for music," Redman says. "I don't know what it is. I've asked other people what it is and I've never really gotten a clear answer. But to me, more than anything else, Ornette's music is about that feeling of being on the edge, right on the cusp of discovery." How this is translated on the stage into lyrical, high-energy, cohesive songs is the mystery of improvisation at its highest level.

In a brief dialogue with trumpeter Payton, the Wynton Marsalis-sanctioned horn player clarifies that while Coleman's innovations encourage players to be "completely open and free to go wherever the music takes us," they stem directly from the jazz lineage. "I think Ornette was very much coming out of [the bop advancements of] Bird and Diz," he points out, "but even back further to the beginning of polyphony and the New Orleans concept of improv, which is a collective sort of thing. I grew up in New Orleans, so to me it's all very similar to that same root of the music."

The paradoxical nature of Coleman's sound -- how it is both a part of and light-years beyond the tradition, almost impossible to talk about and perform eloquently yet not so hard to listen to -- presents critical challenges to musicians bold enough to take the plunge.

The SFJAZZ Collective's first hurdle to overcome was arranging the half-dozen tunes Redman handpicked along with SFJAZZ Executive Director Randall Kline. The widely covered ballad "Lonely Woman" and one of the composer's earliest swinging blues numbers, "When Will the Blues Leave," were relatively easy to adapt to an octet instrumentation that Coleman has, in fact, never employed. But finding the right balance between the band's frontline horns and considerable rhythm section on the spare and quirky "Peace," whimsical "School Work," jumpy "Una Muy Bonita," and wide-open "Happy House" was trickier to pull off.

The group drafted for the job respected arranger Gil Goldstein, who worked with Miles Davis in the last months of his life and more recently with noted saxophonist Michael Brecker. In a casual conversation before the rehearsal at the JCC, Goldstein explains that he did his best to make the "arrangements not sound like arrangements. If it's too arranged," he says, "it doesn't sound like Ornette."

Formidable technique is the next prerequisite for hitting Coleman's convoluted rhythmic cues and the sudden-seeming crescendos in his music with naturalness and precision. On this point, the SFJAZZ Collective is unquestionably on top of its game. As a group, the players' combined experience spans a variety of idioms, including Latin jazz, hard bop, avant-garde, big band, fusion, and plenty of other jazz-derived styles. Redman first earned his industry credentials at 22 by dazzling the judges with his mature technical chops at the Thelonious Monk Institute's 1991 Saxophone Competition, where he took home the top prize and soon launched a major-label recording career. Even during arbitrary warm-ups at the rehearsal one could hear the wide-ranging skills of this band as Payton drew out long, dark, muted tones from his horn (à la Miles Davis), Zenón zoomed through Bach-like harmonic progressions on his alto, and Blade nonchalantly peppered his drum kit with intricate polyrhythms.

But beyond the nuts and bolts of free-feeling arrangements and superior technique, Coleman's music ultimately requires of its interpreters no less than a mastery of the art of improvisation. Blasting through scales on the solo section of a jazz standard is a universe apart from getting "Lonely Woman" to soar into the stratosphere where it belongs. "The biggest difference," Redman says, "is the absence of a structural element that in other modes of jazz you're used to working with. It does give you a lot more freedom, so there's the potential for spontaneous creation/discovery, however the potential for failure is that much greater, too, because you don't have the landmarks along the way."

Though each of the Collective's members has occasionally worked with abstract forms like Coleman's over the years -- Hutcherson, the lone elder in the group, notably recorded with avant-garde maestro Eric Dolphy in the mid-'60s -- none of them has dedicated his or her life to this pursuit. So no matter how well these players navigate the tricky time signatures, labyrinthine arrangements, and stylistic diversity of their own dynamic pieces (in addition to the Coleman set, the band will perform new compositions by each of its members), there's no guarantee that their versions of the Ornette classics will be more than merely good; but competency from this group is a given.

This project is particularly significant for Redman, whose dad, renowned saxophonist Dewey Redman, collaborated with Coleman in the late '60s and early '70s. "I didn't grow up with my father," he says, "but I grew up listening to him, and certainly I have a deep connection to this music." But a strong bloodline and an attuned ear don't necessarily make an improviser an adept. Indeed, after the initial spout of overzealous accolades for Redman's first few albums, most critics now concur that he's a gifted player -- whose open-minded programming for SFJAZZ is both rare and commendable -- but he's no innovator.

While Redman says that he doesn't feel any extra pressure from the gig, he admits that it's going to be a high-wire act for all involved. "There's more risk in trying to improvise over Ornette's music. If you don't have a strong creative idea and if you can't extend that idea over the course of your solo, it's gonna sound like crap."

Most everyone will agree that the players in the SFJAZZ Collective are rock solid, and their ambition is worthy of respect. But do they have what it takes to push Coleman's songs over the top? That, finally, is what remains to be seen.



Collective Challenge: The technically proficient octet before its high-wire act.

Details

SFJAZZ Collective

Details: Thursday, April 1, at 7:30 p.m. and Friday, April 2, at 8 p.m.

Tickets are \$24-44

788-7353

www.sfjazz.org

Where: Palace of Fine Arts Theatre, 3301 Lyon (at Bay), S.F.