

Live Performance Reviews

Bob Belden & Animation Live at Merkin Concert Hall December 9, 2006

By Dimitry Ekshtut

Merkin Hall's diverse and eclectic array of programming has hit upon a novel concept with the Reissue: Classic Recordings Live concert series. The third of four such performances featured Animation, helmed by saxophonist Bob Belden and trumpeter Tim Hagans, reinterpreting Miles Davis' influential and infamous *Bitches Brew*. Far from a simple reenactment of this pivotal moment in the history of recorded jazz, Animation combined a fresh, individualized voice with the adventurous spirit of Miles' music and recaptured the tone this album set upon its original release in 1969. Dark, edgy, and challenging, Animation's take on *Bitches Brew* was thankfully only similar to the original in its adherence to the notion of liberation, musical and otherwise.

The frenetic beats of drummer Guy Lachada and unstoppable grooves of bassist Matt Garrison propelled Animation through "Pharaoh's Dance" to set an intense precedent. The title song "Bitches Brew," wash in a sea of synthesized keyboard textures, featured Hagans' heavily processed trumpet sound. Like his predecessor, Hagans adeptly coaxed an organic naturalism from the bevy of electronic effects augmenting his tone. Lachada's off-kilter playing grooved remarkably well with Garrison despite

their freewheeling and liberal use of accents. Keyboardist Scott Kinsey, the sonic glue binding Animation together at their most precarious, brought the volume down for a solo that bubbled and crackled with energy. Hagans reentered with the melody to the atmospheric turntable scratching of DJ Logic.

Belden, Hagans, and DJ Logic left the stage for "John McLaughlin," a feature of sorts for Animation's rhythm section. Garrison's vibrant, inexhaustible bass grooves figured prominently as Kinsey engaged in a long development-minded solo before giving way to the bassist's own impressive display of improvisational prowess. Alternating between various riffs and sinewy Jaco-like chords, Garrison proved to be just as entrancing a soloist as he is a section player. A human-like voice patch on Kinsey's synthesizer heralded the end of the tune.

The full band returned to give a sizzling rendition "Miles Runs the Voodoo Down," punctuated by Hagans' aggressive yet graceful lines and the whoosh of DJ Logic's turntables. For his solo, Belden engaged in an intimate conversation with Kinsey that made both musicians' contribution to Animation's overall sound obvious. Kinsey culls a beautifully mysterious sound out of his synthesizers and knows how to make music produced by electronic means sound wholly organic, the essential skill that Miles' keyboard players of the era all seemed to share. Belden, with his clean, unprocessed soprano saxophone, serves as the ideal counterpart to Hagans. Like Miles and Wayne Shorter, Belden and Hagans are a genuinely complementary duo that never gets in each other's way.

They paired together for the darkly hypnotic "Spanish Key" before Hagans peeled away to take another solo full of drive and forward momentum.

Speaking of controlled momentum, Animation has a brilliant knack for building effective tension curves throughout a song. What starts with one instrument may grow and expand into cluttered chaos before finally erupting and falling back down into a quiet, simple groove. Wayne Shorter's "Sanctuary," a tune Miles often used to close out his gigs in the late 1960s, epitomized this mastery of molding larger forms. Hagans aired out the straightforward melody with Garrison providing some bass notes here and there. Belden joined in close behind as Kinsey unfurled the song with pad chords that echoed shards of crystal. A groove incorporating techno, funk, and industrial beats catapulted Animation into high gear, the music having turned into a head-nodding, heart-pounding affair pulsating with relentless energy. As Belden and Hagans came back in unison with their short melody, the frantic pace dissipated until only a hovering echo of what had been remained.

Animation proves that one can distill the essence of an album without having to play it verbatim. The band's

interpretation of *Bitches Brew*, a daring project in and of itself, was a grand success because of, rather than despite, the liberties taken. Once again Miles Davis' music has been reinvented and made relevant anew, and there could be no better person for the task than Bob Belden.

Lewis Nash Quintet Live at Rubin Museum of Art December 8, 2006

By Dan Bilawsky

It would be fair to say that Himalayan art and first class jazz don't usually reside in the same artistic realm. However, you would be hard-pressed to realize that if you caught Lewis Nash and his quintet during their recent engagement at the Rubin Museum. The Jazz Museum in Harlem has teamed up with the Rubin Museum of Art to create "Harlem in the Himalayas." This fantastic jazz series presents all-acoustic jazz performances in a gorgeous and intimate setting. The quintet started off the evening with a performance of Sir Roland Hanna's "Let Me Try." Steve Kroon had a veritable cornucopia of percussion instruments on hand, and provided a terrific introduction with his bowing on the exotic sounding instrument known as a waterphone. Nash superbly moved both with and against the rhythmic current of Steve Nelson's vibes. The ensemble precision was noticeable from start to finish. Steve Kroon's solo, toward the end of the song focused on shakers and emphasized hand independence, while Nash provided a groove with some quarter note rim clicks to keep a solid focus on the time and feel. Nash reminisced about his time with Tommy Flanagan before launching into the Flanagan-associated "That Tired Routine Called Love." The true highlight of this song was the tight rhythm section dynamic between Nash, Renee Rosnes on piano and Peter Washington on bass. Rosnes, who performed superbly throughout the entire evening, used the upper register to great effect here - and the hall acoustics clearly favored that part of the pianistic aural spectrum. Nash, who moved between brushes and stick, provided some solid brushwork behind Steve Nelson's solo. The current exhibit at the Rubin Museum focuses on Flying Mystics in Himalayan art, and the museum provided wonderful images and examples, via the screen behind the performers, that really helped to enhance the overall experience.

Nash started off the performance of "Caravan" with a mind-boggling drum solo that began with his hands flying around the toms and continued when Nash picked up his drumsticks. It is very rare to see a drummer who can bring such precision, articulation and control to the drums, while also providing an incredible sense of feeling and imagination. Nash truly encompasses all of these elements. This up-tempo performance was the crowd-pleaser of the first half of the performance and Steve Kroon's bongo solo was a clear highlight. Following a brief intermission, Nash performed an improvised drum solo titled "Ascendance," which lead straight into "Pranayama." This song, in addition to "Let Me Try," are two of many phenomenal tracks on Nash's *Rhythm Is My Business* album and they



Bob Belden by Eric Nemeyer



Lewis Nash by Eric Nemeyer

translated equally well to the stage. The connection between this song and the current exhibition at the museum was noted before the drum solo began, and Nash used his trademark wind-shield-wiper-esque crossovers, from drums to cymbals and back, to delight the crowd. "Sophisticated Lady" was a feature for Steve Nelson's vibes and his impressionistic introduction segued into an equally moving performance of this Duke Ellington classic. The band followed this with a piece that featured some fantastic soloing from Rosnes and the only bass solo of the evening. Rosnes alternated between some "Flight Of The Bumblebee"-like runs and some strong bluesy statements. Washington, who provided the stability and grounding throughout the entire night, demonstrated his superb soloing and phenomenal intonation during his bass solo. Rosnes, Nash and Nelson had some fun trading solos around toward the end of the song. "Arioso" by James Williams provided a nice change of pace and the gentle tranquility of Nelson's vibes was perfectly matched by the entire ensemble. The evening came to an end with a burning performance of Kenny Barron's "New York Attitude." This song moved between an up-tempo swing feel and a fiery latin groove. Rosnes burned through a tremendous solo and Nash lit up the room by trading solos with Kroon. The outstanding musical performance, intimate setting and wonderful art were all contributing factors to a truly enchanting evening of music.

Mickey Bass Live at Minton's Playhouse November 10, 2006

By Mercy Monet

Minton's Playhouse in Harlem recently re-opened - since closing in 1974 - and featured Mickey Bass, the great musician, composer, arranger, record producer, educator, bandleader, and veteran Bebopper. His illustrious career has included performances with many influential musicians, but is best known for his musical collaboration with Art Blakey and The Jazz Messengers. Mickey is also an educator of merit, contributing his multiple talents as teacher and mentor at the world

famous Jazzmobile Institute - where he teaches acoustic bass, composition and arranging. Just recently, Bass was called upon to revive and promote the newly renovated Minton's Playhouse. He played at this hot spot back when jazz clubs flourished in Harlem.

Minton's was the spawning ground of Bebop and was fertile soil for the masters of the music: Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker, to name a few. A seasoned and formidable bass player, Mickey hasn't missed a beat. His longevity and musical expertise has deepened and matured with time and experience.

Bass graced the stage at Minton's with his quarter, The Manhattan Burn Unit, and burn they did! The group, comprised of Alan Palmer on piano, Charles Davis, Jr., on tenor and soprano saxophones, Mark E. Johnson on drums, and bandleader Mickey Bass on acoustic bass, wasted no time in heating up the crowd with a vengeance, with their straight ahead, no nonsense music. Bass introduced a Bebop original, "Mudd's Mode", a self-penned tune written by Bass for his friend, the late John Hicks, and recorded on Mr. Hick's CD, "Piece For My Peace." This tune was rich with creative harmonic changes and adventuresome. Alan Palmer jammed with a deep, convincing swing, prior to lyrical solos by saxophonist Charles Davis Jr., and drummer, Mark E. Johnson. Bass' solo was captivating and masterfully executed. Another original Bass tune, "Suite 2C" was next up. I know you're wondering about the title. Bass says he wrote it while he was on tour with Clark Terry in a really "frigid" December month in Chicago. He stayed focused on his cozy and warm apartment back in the Big Apple to get him through the very cold and unforgiving weather. Next was "Soul Eyes", by Mal Waldron, followed by another Bass original, "New Dawn," a lively swingin' gem with the musicians playing in the pocket. It was a great closing number and finale. The Manhattan Burn Unit is a group of superb musicians committed to keeping jazz alive. This was a stellar performance, expressed by commanding musicians. The genuine, uncontrived nature of this music and its ability to provide a conduit to the souls of the performers and listeners alike can only serve to inspire jazz lovers, and connect people who could be jazz lovers (if only this music could get greater exposure).



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To book any of the above musicians, contact:

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Marcus Strickland **Two-Life Group** Live at Rubin Museum of Art November 3, 2006

By Christopher Lams

In New York City, we as jazz fans experience something very unique. We have the opportunity to hear so many great jazz musicians on any given night. The pot is always sweetened when the artist is in a fine venue as well. On this fall evening we had both elements covered. The Rubin Museum which has become one of the top venues in New York City to experience jazz performances. It comes with an acoustic-only room, and Himalayan visuals that soar by on the wall during the performance. Saxophonist Marcus Strickland with his Two-Life Group is the featured group on the bill this evening, as part of the Harlem in the Himalayan's Series. Strickland & the Rubin proved for a great night of jazz.

Strickland's Two-Life Group is one of the most exciting new ensembles on the scene today. With his twin brother EJ on drums and turnstile exchange of the bass and piano chairs, this group always has a fresh approach to Strickland's compositions. On this evening the piano chair was filled by Robert Rodriguez and the bass post was held by Luques Curtis.

The two hour set opened with "The Way of the Y" which demonstrated the exceptional ability of Marcus Strickland. He not only is one of the top composers on the scene today, but he is also a premier saxophonist. Next up on the set list was "The Beast within the Beauty"

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Marcus Strickland by Eric Nemeyer

and "Splendor" which gave the entire ensemble three moments to excel. EJ Strickland on drums is clearly one of the tops in the jazz scene today. His expressionistic approach has him shifting gears throughout each composition. His connection with brother Marcus is also apparent. They seem to think as one on the band stand.

Strickland continued with an arrangement of Billy Strayhorn's "Chelsea Bridge" which was simply brilliant. Bassist Luques Curtis came up front to add some of the sweetest bass tones I have heard on the live side in some time, and Robert Rodriguez moved up and down the eighty-eights to give this classic the right sentiment. The group took a moment to dedicate a composition to the theme of the museum, which is Himalayan art. The piece "Ascent to the Tibetan Plateau" clearly showed the

influence of Wayne Shorter on Mr. Strickland. His atonal structure during the piece with Tibetan images being flashed on the back stage wall was one of the highlights of the set.

The evening closed with two exceptional Strickland compositions "Amen" and "Sesame Street." We are not referring to the *Sesame Street* theme song here, but a restructure of the chords to the original kids television theme which Strickland then called his own.

Strickland has a creative mind, the ability to compose, and had all those in attendance in the palm of his hand for this full two hour set. We will be hearing much more from this new saxophone giant in the years to come.

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JAN 9-14

LEWIS NASH QUINTET

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AFTER HOURS: IAJE NFAA CLIFFORD BROWN/STAN GETZ ALL STAR
ALUMNI SHOWCASE (JAN 9)

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FELLOWSHIP ALL-STARS (JAN 12)

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