
Shuffle Demons' spirit moves audience; [ONT Edition]

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Full Text (661 words)

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There were thrills aplenty to wipe out the big chill at the Oakville Jazz Festival, surely none more entertaining than the reunited Shuffle Demons who capered and crunched through a bizarre mix of bebop and quaint urban rap before an audience dressed for Friday's Fall-like weather.

Their antics closed the first of two days of free performances on five stages in downtown Oakville, from which vehicles were banned. (Those unwise enough to leave portable chairs at home were lucky if they found anywhere to squat.)

Five stages means plenty of jazz, with a large contingent of vocalists on tap for the gathering, but the "vocals" of the demonic gang may stick in the memory the longest.

Reformed recently by leader Richard Underhill, the Shuffle Demons dipped into their crazed repertoire of the past 20 years with such crowd-pleasers as "Cheese On Bread," which evolved into a wild rap, and "The Funkin' Pumpkin," tailor-made for audience participation. They capped it with a rendition of "Out Of My House, Cockroach" that was preceded by a manic cockroach exorcism dance around the Towne Square stage.

The group, just back from a nationwide tour and taking succour from boss Underhill's record-breaking recent honkathon when Toronto's masses turned out to play the "Hockey Night In Canada" theme, were in spirited form. Their glowing costumes were displayed in a shuffle through the audience to get things started, and then they launched into their theme music complete with chanting.

Yet they can play. The combo of three saxes - founder Underhill on alto, original member Dave Parker on tenor and Chris Gale on baritone and tenor - plus bass Mike Milligan and the indefatigably manic Stich Wynston on drums is unusual, but right at home when tearing into bebop classics by Thelonious Monk and the roaring Charles Mingus composition "Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting."

There were teeth-rattling riffs, pants-on-fire soloing and a dose or two of delicious shrieking dissonance. These guys are fun.

Garrulous hornmen were to be found on the street in at least two other bands whose jazz credentials are in good order.

Earlier at the same venue, guitarist Jake Langley led a fivesome through a strong, 90-minute set that showed off not only his sterling work but the talents of Shawn Nykwist on tenor and soprano sax.

Langley delivered electric, hard-bop music that never quite segued into fusion. The band was exciting but not overbearing, with an electric bassist (Rich Brown), a Fender Rhodes exponent (Dylan Hemming) and a drummer (Mark Kelso) who's always comfortable in the fusion field.

They crunched into action with "Chitlins Con Carne" and then worked over Langley originals like the surging "Dot.Com" and "Mode Swing" with Brown and Kelso providing a granite rhythmic base to support the leader's fleet flurries and artful phrasing and the adventurous forays of Nykwist. "Aquarian Sunrise" was a treat, as were funky closers that featured clattering drums, full-frontal keyboard chording and edgy soloing.

Earlier on the Revolution Music stage, Paul Neufeld fielded his Rhythm and Truth band, which

used to be dominated by brass. Now the leader has brought in two saxophonists - Lester McLean on alto, Sean O'Connor on tenor - and guitarist Colin Campbell to co-exist with trombonist Steve Donald, trumpeter Kevin Turcotte and Doan Pham on drums.

Neufeld, who is also a talented pianist and co-leader of improvising big band NOJO, totes a sousaphone, which means that the music is right for romping all the time.

The first of three sets (which made them the busiest band of the night) was heavy with funk, lusty riffs, blustery soloing and a bunch of tunes by Bob Marley and James Brown as well as basic blues and jazz pieces.

McLean is a hectoring vocalist, too, and squeals in all the right places, which made reggae anthems like "Lively Up Yourself" and "What's Wrong Girl" work well, and James Brown's epic "I Got The Feeling" and "Make It Funky" even better.

Credit: special to the star

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