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Playboy Jazz Festival gives fans variety and vitality

By MARTIN WISCKOL
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Story Highlights

Dianne Reeves and Eddie Palmieri are standouts on a strong day that also included young trumpeter Ambrose Akimusic and the Roots.

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While Saturday's acts at the Playboy Jazz Festival spanned the generations, it was two veterans – singer Dianne Reeves and salsero Eddie Palmieri – who owned the Hollywood Bowl's rotating stage.

[See photos of performers and fans at the Playboy Jazz Festival](#)



Multi talented performer Jamie Foxx, center, arrives at Saturday's Playboy Jazz Festival with his entourage. ARMANDO BROWN, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Playboy Jazz Festival
Where: Hollywood Bowl
When: June 11

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The golden age of jazz divas is more than 50 years gone, but Reeves, 54, updates the essential musical aspects of Ella, Sarah and Billie supremely. Since that long-past era, there have been a small handful of female vocal masters, chiefly Abbey Lincoln, Carmen McRae and Betty Carter. Reeves has also absorbed work of those three, and arrived at a distinctive voice and approach that puts her securely in this elite lineage.

Reeves' song list Saturday was fresh with surprises and even fresher with spontaneity. From the songs of Lincoln and Brazil's Milton Nascimento to a rubato "Stormy Weather" to Gnarts Barkley's "Crazy," the repertoire reflected her embrace of both tradition and modern times. Her accompanying quartet interacted with her as a top-flight combo would a strong horn soloist, leaving plenty of space for her to stretch out and responding to her lead. And she took full advantage of the possibilities, from a cappella song intros to a duet with bassist Reginald Veal to leading the band through an impromptu set-ending jam.

This last segment, launched when Reeves was informed she could have a little more time before Palmieri took over, began by her leading the band with Jamaican dance hall-influenced scat, wound around to a unique take on "Summertime," then morphed into John Coltrane's "Afro Blue." It concluded a set that was rich with nuance, highlighted by audience call-and-response, marked by the talent to perform rousingly without histrionics or blatant showmanship.

It also left room for Palmieri, 74, to turn it up a notch, and his 11-person unit was at high-mercury burn by the time the stage had swung fully into view. Palmieri's music hasn't changed much over the years, a phenomenon that for many artists is accompanied by the curse of complacency. Not so in this case. The pianist

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continues to guide his fiery, super-tight salsa ensemble through infectious, polyrhythmic journeys as though their lives depended on it. The crowd responded by coming to its feet, including both experienced salsa dancers and neophytes who couldn't sit still.

Palmieri would have made an indelible mark for the depth and beauty of his ensemble sound, but what's made him a standout among the best salsaeros are the jazz-influenced improvisations. His own piano excursions repeatedly pranced off into abstract wilderness before pulling back into the more obvious melodic field, and the improv spots for two longtime associates – trombonist Conrad Herwig and trumpeter Brian Lynch – were among the most memorable solos of the day.

Other highlights of the first day of the festival included the SF Jazz Collective's adventurous take on the songs of Stevie Wonder, which worked remarkably well and featured top-shelf solos from saxists Greg Osby and David Sanchez. A gathering of New Orleans' finest – the Rebirth Jazz Band, saxist Donald Harrison, clarinetist Dr. Michael White among them – got the crowd to its feet and waving white hankies.

Upcoming trumpeter Ambrose Akimusic displayed his smart, sophisticated harmonic sense with probing explorations that extended concepts of Freddie Hubbard and Booker Little rather than offer the Miles Davis references that have become almost inescapable. And concluding the night was the high-charged hip-hop rock of the Roots, which saved itself from having nothing to do with rock by bringing out trumpeter Terence Blanchard for a tartly grooving take on the recently departed Gil Scott-Heron's "The Bottle."

Contact the writer: 714-932-1648 or mwisckol@ocregister.com

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12:37 PM on June 13, 2011

As far as I'm concerned, jazz is the only music left that is a pure expression of art. It form allows it's practioners to freely create without being encumbered by the need to be commercial, appeal to the "masses", and make money for record executives. Whether you are aware of this aspect or not, this is what you are hearing, and this is what makes it so positive and enjoyable (a fact to which these photographs will attest). Glad to see so much of the public responds to this, and kudos to PLAYBOY for continuing to provide a venue for this outstanding artistry.

1 reply

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10:58 AM on June 13, 2011

I was at Saturday night's show and it was amazing! The New Orlean's music inspired a "Second Line" around the entire Bowl, and Palmieri's music inspired a conga line around it as well. Amazing! It was my first time hearing Dianne Reeves, and I am

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definitely a fan! She was incredible. ALready looking forward to next year's festival.



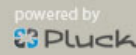
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