

Snowbird Jazz and Blues Festival

7/25/1999

The poster described the event as the 12th Annual Snowbird Jazz and Blues Festival and it was all of that, and more, with Little Cottonwood Canyon, as always, putting on a production of its own. You really do get a full plate when you order from this menu. A weekend of great music in a sub-alpine setting at the base of billion year-old (give or take) canyon walls is nothing to sneeze at, even when the wild flowers are in bloom. And this year there was some rollicking and rolling lightning and thunder thrown into the mix. But that only adds to the overall scene for jazz and blues fans, you dig.

Kicking things off Friday evening were the Tempo Timers, that fine Utah based outfit headed by guitarist/vocalist Rick Welter. It seems like only yesterday he rolled into town with Charlie Musslewhite for a gig at the now defunct Cowboy Bar. One of their highlights and a nod to the weather was a tasty take on Elmore James' classic "The Sky Is Crying." A treat for "blues-nighters" who wouldn't be taking in Saturday jazz festivities was the inclusion of the elegant Gene Harris Quartet to back up vocalist Ernie Andrews. Harris' group appeared to be having the time of their lives, truly "getting off" on the "reach" allowed by the classic blues sensibility.

Andrews gave the crowd a wonderful journey through the history of big-band jazz-blues vocal style, and when he sang "If it's not asking too much, please send me someone to love" the crowd gave him all he could handle. A further demonstration of Ernie's chops came when he crooned King Pleasure's familiar lyrics to "Parker's Mood", showcasing his vocal instrument with the mellow intonations of a Charlie "Bird" Parker alto-sax riff.

Jimmy Thakery, late of those phenomenal '70s bluesbashers "The Nighthawks", was up next, and, let me tell you, time for intellectualizing the idiom had flat come to an end. Jimmy Thakery and the Drivers are one great rockin' blues powerhouse, and the man and his Stratocaster have taken that "unresolved tension" thing just about as far as it can go.

The Drivers don't spend much time giving turn signals; in fact they're all over the road. Their Chicago style slips into Wilson Pickett which leads to Booker T. and an off-ramp to Memphis. This is one cohesive rhythm machine. One that could hold its own in any blues setting and one you wouldn't want to follow onstage.

Unless you are Friday night's headliner, Elvin Bishop, that is. Elvin, a.k.a. Pigboy Crabshaw, you see, is fearless. Oftentimes, justifiably so. But even this longtime legend paid homage to that "Thakery bunch" upon taking the stage.

Elvin is a bib-overall sporting "fishin' musician" from Oklahoma. His eyes and body language border on the manic, and, as he prowls the stage, he resembles, say, a young Walter Brennan on the cusp of Jack Nicholson. Pigboy is a package.

Bishop, however, is a survivor, and, over the years has cleaned up his act. As one who has seen ex-bandmates Paul Butterfield and Mike Bloomfield leave this life way too early, 56 year-old Elvin views a different path. Whereas he once "religiously" consumed a good amount of Budweiser each and every day, he has lost that religion. In "Slow Down" from his CD "The Skin I'm In" he humorously exhorts his peers to "get off that alcohol and get on that Geritol" and to "get off that cocaine and get on that Rogaine."

Basically though, an Elvin Bishop concert is nothing if not off-scale fun. This one was no different and featured, along with a few "greatest hits," a couple of instrumental gems driven by Elvin himself: the Ivory Joe Hunter classic "Since I Met You Baby" and the beautiful Bishop original "Fooled Around and Fell In Love."

Sunday night is Jazz night at the Snowbird Jazz and Blues Festival and, compared to Blues night on Friday, is much more laid back. This arrangement works particularly well for those who, back for a second night, find they may have peaked too early. The contemplative nature of Jazz also helps in this recovery process for the musically addicted.

Guitarist Mark Elf proved an engaging opening act. Performing selections from his recent CD "New York Cats" and backed by an excellent local rhythm section, Elf showed why the guitar trio is such an intimate format. He mentioned how impressed he was with the high level of jazz appreciation he found at the Festival and that he just might, upon returning to the Big Apple, pack his bags and move to the Wasatch.

For the first time ever the Festival presented a group of the "smooth jazz" persuasion. Brian Bromberg's group featured monster musicians with enough collective virtuosity to power Yanni, Tesh, and Kenny G into the next millennium. Bromberg's performance on the "piccolo-bass" alone was worthy of admittance to the New Age Hall of Fame.

Fans of this music do support commercial radio outlets and do buy concert tickets as proved by the Sunday show at last years Park City Jazz Festival. It's just that where a mainstream jazz concert emits enough mind-stimuli to keep me totally enthralled, I find myself reaching for a crossword puzzle or any worthy distraction when in the audio company of this music. As Merle Haggard said about Garth Brooks: He just doesn't turn my crank."

A perfect antidote, the Roy Hargrove Quintet, was next on stage, and he was just what the doctor ordered. Here you go, take two doses of flugelhorn nuance and call me in the morning. Hargrove is a tone stylist, a dispenser of trumpet and flugelhorn subtlety, and a shining light upon the current jazz scene. His treatments of the ballad form are downright chilling, as are his forays with his alto player. And, as with any good baseball team, the Hargrove Quintet is strong up the middle. His rhythm section is a highly competent piano-trio in its own right.

Headlining the Sunday jazz show was the Gene Harris Quartet, a Salt Lake City favorite for many years. Following Saturday's great backing stint with Ernie Andrews the group was once again in the familiar territory of their own groove: sparkling piano-guitar quartet jazz. Embellishing the blues-tinged repertoire of the Harris ensemble were

tenor and alto-sax legend Ernie Watts and Harris' daughter Nicki, a young jazz vocalist well on her way. Watts' improvisational breaks on a Charlie Parker tribute showcased all the right elements of "straight ahead" jazz. Daughter Nicki demonstrated some beautiful pipes and tonal control on the standards "Cheek To Cheek," "Teach Me tonight," and "Masquerade" but her desire to endear herself to the audience via stand-up comedy served to detract, but only slightly.

All in all, the great Gene Harris gave joyful validity and completeness to what was, once again, a truly inspiring weekend of jazz and blues. And once again the setting, Snowbird and Little Cottonwood Canyon, provided the perfect backdrop.