



Times, Squared

Fringe Beat

By Josef Woodard

Thursday, November 13, 2008

SCENTS OF LIBERATION: When the **Liberation Music Orchestra** recently filled the Lobero with smart, politically encoded big-band music, the room swarmed with scents of liberation. **Carla Bley's** brilliant arrangements and hip revisions of Americana found an ideal venue to shine in, for all its witty, plaintive, and ultimately reassuring worth.

That sensation shot up several notches a few nights later, as the band strategically ended its pre-election tour at the **Blue Note** in Greenwich Village. In the middle of the late set, as if on cue, ecstatic words reached the stage: "Obama has won!" Rousing applause, on and off the stage, rattled the room for a few minutes. Bassist/leader **Charlie Haden** effused "I'm so happy. Now, I

don't have to wake up depressed every day. Now, it's time for 'Amazing Grace.'" And it was, via Bley's tart-yet-sweet chart, as muffled whoops and hollers drifted inside from West Third Street.

Obama fever has been bubbling up for months, of course, including in the largely progressive realms of jazz across the land and here in the jazz Mecca of N.Y.C. Buzzes of anticipation could be felt the night before in clubland here. Monday night is hardly an "off" night in New York: It is when big bands and special projects take up residencies, including the ongoing presence of official Mingus bands, most recently in the vibe-filled basement of the Jazz Standard. (While there, check out the savory BBQ from the host eatery, Smoke.) Great to know that Charles Mingus's unique songbook and spirit is alive and well in the city where his creative fire raged.

During last Monday's set by the seven-piece **Mingus Dynasty** band—featuring tenor player **Seamus Blake**, drummer **Jeff “Tain” Watts**, **Kuumba Frank Lacy**, etc.—alto saxist **Craig Handy** greeted us with, "Welcome to the Jazz Standard, on the night before the world changes. Hopefully, when we go to Europe on tour, they won't throw tomatoes at us anymore." The band launched into one of Mingus's politically barbed chestnuts, "Fables of Faubus."

Took the A train up to Harlem, moseyed past the Apollo Theater on Martin Luther King Boulevard to Malcolm X Boulevard, where the historic jazz haunt **Lenox Lounge** hummed with a Monday jam session at midnight. Host and bandleader of the Sugar Hill Quartet, **Patience Higgins**, boasted, "If you were downtown, you'd be going home by now. Here, we play 'til the cows come home." Higgins later said, "I'm overwhelmed with joy that I can take my mother to vote. She was on the back of the bus. She drank from the 'colored' drinking fountain. She never would have believed we might have a black president. The forces of good are gonna overwhelm the forces of evil." A thought we can all get behind.

Later that day, CNN had set up shop at Duffy Square, with bleachers and a jumbo TV screen battling the Disneyland-esque stimuli in the New Times Square. In the meridian wedge across the way, **Max Neuhaus**'s meditatively droning sound art piece *Times Square* filters up through the grate—a subversively peaceful oasis amid the Times Square sensory blitzkrieg. It wasn't so peaceful on this day, however, as a buff (and nearly in-the-buff) "Naked Cowboy" strummed a guitar plastered with McCain-Palin stickers, offering nuzzling and photo ops while an Elvis impersonator pestered onlookers for \$2 tips, with Neuhaus's minimalist drone beneath their feet. Now that's America!

By midnight in Times Square, the place was a blissed-out madhouse, a crush of people barely restrained by anxious-looking N.Y.C. cops. People gathered and milled, indulged in hugs and high-fiving with strangers they would have otherwise assiduously avoided. They sent spontaneous shout-outs: "O-ba-ma! O-ba-ma!," or "yes, we did! yes, we did!" or "U.S.A.! U.S.A.!" (haven't heard that one much in the past eight years). Hordes lined the sidewalks and cars drove by soaking up the attention as if they were stars in a parade, but we're all part of this parade, bursting with genuine, if cautious, hope.

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