

Westward Expansion: Monterey at 50

Guest Column

When it comes to jazz *legacy*, that oft-used and misused l-word, the Monterey Jazz Festival has an unusually bountiful supply. That fact rang clearly in the cool late-night air of the Monterey Fairgrounds arena on the closing Sunday night of its 50th annual festival in September. Sonny Rollins, one of many artists here who were present at the inaugural 1958 festival, served up one of his robust performances, capping off a stellar musical weekend. Earlier that evening, alumni from festival number one included Monterey regular Dave Brubeck, with fellow first-festival visitor Jim Hall sitting in.

Elsewhere during the weekend, the '58 reunion guest list included vocalist Ernestine Anderson and vibraphonist Buddy Montgomery, who revisited the festival where he and his brothers, guitar legend Wes and bassist Monk, launched their career with the group called the Mastersounds.

More disarming on the list of '58 visitors was Ornette Coleman, who had been on a bill with Ben Webster and Coleman Hawkins here, just before he headed to NYC and stunned and awakened the jazz world. Coleman's set on Sunday afternoon in the arena was an ecstatic festival moment, even though the timing seemed strange, his loose and liberated sound following the tight, polished sound of youthful big bands. Coleman's current three-bass project, despite the seeming oddity of instrumentation, has an uncanny ability to touch listeners, and beyond just the diehard Ornette-philies.

For the record, this set had a stronger impact than Ornette's appearance with the electric Prime Time in 1994. That billing came soon after current director Tim Jackson took the reins, and vastly upped the then-staggering festival's artistic credibility.

While it claims status as the world's oldest continuously running jazz festival, Monterey was not the first. Festival founders Jimmy Lyons and sagacious scribe Ralph Steadman lifted the idea from Newport and transplanted it westward to the sprawling and agreeably rustic (or loveably funky) Monterey County Fairgrounds. Newport broke its continuity over the years, but Monterey has prevailed, and various European festivals followed in its shadow beginning in the early '60s.

Personally speaking, the Monterey festival has had a strong emotional pull for me, as a fellow '58 baby. For Californian jazz lovers, there is the matter of regional, proprietary pride casting a glow over Monterey, clearly the best in the west. Other West Coast festivals have distinguished themselves, including the mighty—though drawn-out and tourist-unfriendly—San Francisco Jazz Festival, celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. Seattle's Earshot Festival and the Portland Jazz Festival have demonstrated venturesome programming, and the Vancouver Jazz Festival belongs in the upper echelon of the international festival circuit.

But Monterey is a beast of its own devising, with tricky, broad parameters and a surprising success rate, especially in the Jacksonian years. When I started making the pilgrimage to Monterey in the mid-'80s, the festival's musical integrity was sagging. Then, it verged on irrelevancy, at least as an indicator of the myriad facets which make up jazz's diversity and richness. That changed with the baton-passing to Jackson, who has managed the feat of balancing multiple constituencies of audience tastes and the festival's own heritage, while also carefully folding in sounds from jazz's cutting edges.

This year's festival opened with a respectful nod to the recently belated Joe Zawinul, as Zawinul's "In a Silent Way" and "Walk Tall" kicked off the set by the Anthony Wilson Nonet. The irony is that Zawinul felt the chill of Monterey's indifference for years. His classic band Weather Report

never played here, an omission that seems almost culturally criminal. Zawinul finally showed up with the Zawinul Syndicate in 1998, and brandished a defiant, chest-thumping bravado as he faced the crowd at set's end, standing tall while the curtain closed on him.

Too little mention was made this year of the passing of Max Roach, who had last visited here in '94 with his innovative percussion group M'Boom. Drummer Benny Barth did pay respects to the great, dedicating "Hot House" to Roach.

As for the festival's most poignant set, the honor goes to artist-in-residence Terence Blanchard's "A Tale of God's Will (Requiem for Katrina)," with a chamber orchestra fleshing out the eloquent sonic banquet of Blanchard's tribute to his battered, proud hometown.

Veteran L.A.-based big-band leader Gerald Wilson, who first played Monterey in 1963, has been commissioned to write special pieces for the festival. This year's theme-and-variations model, "Monterey Moods," is similar to 1997's "Theme for Monterey." In this case, Wilson comes from different arrangement/compositional angles on a simple 10-measure theme, with accents designed to accommodate the mantra "Mon-ter-ey." Needless to say, boosterist spirit was in the air, and more than usual, at this 50th bash.

One of Monterey's most celebrated boosters is jazz-loving director-actor Clint Eastwood, also a longtime neighbor. This year, Eastwood was given an honorary degree from the Berklee College of Music in a mock-academic ceremony onstage on Saturday night. Diana Krall gave him his degree and a kiss, and Eastwood shrugged, "I think the only reason they gave me this is because I know the difference between an A sharp and a B flat." Eastwood also shared a panel discussion with independent-minded director John Sayles, on the subject of music-film liaisons and attitudes.

Life continues boldly after 50 for Monterey, now in a forward-looking and outreach-minded phase. They're launching a new record label, issuing both archival recordings and new projects, and the Monterey festival brand goes on tour with both the ongoing Next Generation Jazz Orchestra and the road-ready Monterey 50th Anniversary All-Stars, featuring Blanchard, James Moody, Benny Green and Nnenna Freelon, coming soon to a city near you.

For this habitual festgoer's money, the highlights of the 50th party came on the first night, unseasonable downpour notwithstanding. Opening the arena roster was a remarkable quartet assembled and commissioned for the occasion, with Chris Potter, Dave Holland, Gonzalo Rubalcaba and Eric Harland. On evocative, ink-still-wet originals, they played with the elusive, magical blend of exploration and assurance that represents this festival at its finest.

Later that night, around midnight in the Coffeehouse Gallery, keyboardist Craig Taborn issued some of the freshest piano-trio notions from either side of the Mississippi. Hearing both these projects, the clearly imparted message was that in the best jazz, of whatever era or stylistic badge, legacy mixes in with the living, breathing creative impulse. **JT**