

Bennie Wallace at The Jazz Bakery

February 9, 2006

More is better. That seems to be the essence of the Bennie Wallace esthetic. Wallace plays like the notes have been building up inside him for quite a while, and he can't spit them out fast enough. Put him onstage at the Bakery with a tenor in his mouth and a hot rhythm section, and you're going to get an earful, I can assure you.

Wallace's playing sounds like a highly caffeinated cross between Coleman Hawkins and Eric Dolphy, if you can imagine that. His "vertical" approach is not unlike Hawkins' while his harmonic and conceptual model is straight out of the Dolphy canon. He uses the stacked chords and "sheets of sound" style originated by John Coltrane, some would say to excess, and although his harmonic concept is way outside, his tone is breathy and warm - more like Ben Webster than Trane. From beginning to end his lines consist of a continuous barrage of rapid-fire passages with no pause other than for an occasional catch-breath.

This style of playing is not easy to listen to and hasn't much of an audience beyond a handful of sax players and hard-core fans of the former avant garde. Understandably the audience at the Jazz Bakery in Culver City Thursday night was relatively lean (about 20 people) - an almost exclusively male group largely comprised of over-40 musician types.

The Bakery may well be my favorite live jazz venue in LA. With a low stage, theater-style seating, excellent acoustics, and subtle lighting it is an intimate space that favors

musicians and the creation of imaginative music. Free of the distractions found in nightclubs (tinkling silverware, wait staff milling about) the audience and musicians can concentrate on the music.

I must admit I had no awareness of Wallace before Thursday night, but I saw Anthony Wilson on the bill and figured it was probably worth checking out. I have come to learn that Wallace spent the 70s among the New York avant garde, and has recorded with Sheila Jordan, Kenny Barron, Tommy Flanagan, and Mose Allison, among others. He's spent much of the last decade writing for Hollywood. On this date, his backing band consisted of Wilson on guitar, Danton Boller on upright bass, and Alvin Queen on drums.

The set kicked off with a tune which I did not recognize, the sax and bass doubling the melody at a breakneck pace. From the start the sax played far more notes than any human ears could possibly process. This number had two dynamic levels: loud and loud. With the sax sputtering and the band hammering out a triple fortissimo, the net result was sonic mush. Amazingly Wilson's guitar actually sang. It is very difficult in such a situation for a guitarist to be heard above the din without the guitar sounding harsh or overly saturated. But Wilson cut right through with impossible clarity and warmth.

The first number closed with Wilson and Wallace trading eights with drummer Alvin Queen, and in doing so revealed Queen to be the sparkling gem of the evening. Queen's playing is crisp, authoritative, and insistent. His phrases are so musical and tasteful, and he is such a deep groove player that he would have seemed out of place in this setting

were it not for his ability to masterfully mold his playing to the needs of the moment. His pulse is irresistible and gives each soloist exactly what they need; his drum solos were imbued with beautiful balance and taste. The man is unquestionably a master and for me he made enjoyable and inspiring what could have otherwise been quite tedious music.

The band then launched into the standard “Under a Blanket of Blue.” Wallace played another overwrought solo which included a quote from Coleman Hawkins’ famous “Body and Soul” recording. Wilson played a nice chord melody solo.

A terrific funky, drum solo kicked off the next number, an adaptation of the old spiritual “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho” (a tune which has also been recorded by Hawkins). For me this was the highlight of the set. Once the band got going, Boller and Queen locked into a funky, raucous, New Orleans-style groove that absolutely rocked the rafters.

Wilson played a wonderful solo that built slowly to a tremendous climax, at which point this band was undeniably GETTING DOWN. I’ve heard Anthony on many occasions and although his style is a bit outside for my tastes, he always manages to surprise and/or amaze me. Thursday was no exception. He played with phenomenal precision and at points catapulted the band to new levels of rhythmic drive.

Wallace may have had Hawk on his mind that night, because the next tune began with an extended solo sax intro that eventually morphed into a triple-meter version of “Body and Soul.” Bassist Boller caught a fragment of the melody in Wallace’s long-winded preamble and picked it up right away. For most of the first chorus though, Wilson

appeared somewhat lost - either not knowing what the tune was or possibly what key, but by the guitar solo he was on track and played a nice, if somewhat abstract, solo.

The set closed with what seemed to be a tune based on “All the Things You Are” although taken so far out I wouldn’t swear by it. Bass and sax again doubled the head which was a crazy, angular line and it’s very much to Danton Boller’s credit that he was able to double Wallace on these lines and play them in time and in tune – no small feat.

I must admit that Wallace’s stream-of-consciousness style is not my favorite. At one time, it would have sounded fresh and cutting-edge (that time being about thirty years ago). But in a post-modern world it just sounds trite and self-indulgent. It is a style which makes no accommodation for the audience. Excepting a handful of sophisticated jazz listeners, very few people would find it interesting and even fewer would likely find it enjoyable.

Having said that, I have to say I respect Wallace’s choice to play whatever music interests and inspires him regardless of the size of the audience for it. Many who play this (formerly) avant garde style do so solely to spite the audience, or in an effort to show the world how intellectual they are. They are often players with weak technique hoping to hide the holes in their playing. In Wallace’s playing there is no malice or egotism. And there is no doubt the man has a highly fertile improvisatory imagination and immense technical facility. There just is no filter applied to that stream of consciousness and the result can be exhausting.