

Live Performance Reviews

Reed's Bass Drum Live at The Stone January 28, 2010

By *Dimitry Ekshtut*

Reed's Bass Drum is the *nom de plume* of a talented collective banded together to explore the possibilities of the saxophone trio format. Baritone saxophonist Jonah Parzen-Johnson, bassist Noah Garabedian, and drummer Aaron Ewing all met while studying jazz at New York University. It was perhaps this academic environment, where the traditional and the avant-garde are equally accessible, that caused Reed's Bass Drum to infuse the standard bebop sax trio with a modern sensibility incorporating odd time signatures, polyrhythms, and a melding of through-composition and improvisation. On the heels of the release of their debut recording, *Which Is Which*, the group showcased their most recent musical findings at saxophonist John Zorn's eclectic Alphabet City venue, The Stone.

Playing through a cadre of original compositions in the barebones, black box theater of a venue, the performance had a hushed, recital-like quality. As such, it was more an exposition of progress to date rather than a restatement of completed work. The journey of finding the music, however, can be just as exhilarating, if not more so, than its inevitable conclusion. Watching these young, talented musicians engaged in the act of discovery proved exciting on its own merits.

"Which is Which", penned by Ewing, laid out a blueprint for the band's concept. An odd-time groove in the melody kept the music floating along, while the solo section emerged as an opportunity for Parzen-Johnson to blow behind a solid common time feel. The somewhat unusual combination of baritone saxophone, bass, and drums allowed each instrument to be heard clearly, each component audible both as an independent thread and part of the overall texture. While rooted in the tradition of saxophone-led trios, Reed's Bass Drum generally stays clear of those well-worn fields, choosing instead to plod away in less trampled areas.

A composition by Garabedian, "No, A Shark", demanded an equal amount of melody from each member of the trio. The tune's contrapuntal texture allowed the instruments to rotate between leading and complementary roles. Garabedian supplied little fills between spurts of Parzen-Johnson's melody, while Ewing interjected compelling, melodic phrases from the drums. Parzen-Johnson's warm, round sound on the baritone filled up the sonic space on his solo before a thoughtful dialogue emerged between the bass and drums. The delicate texture continued for the duration of the tune before coming to rest with an outro for baritone and bass.

Playing with a collected focus belying their age, the trio moved to "Changes", a Parzen-Johnson composition displaying a chamber-like propensity for counterpoint, thoughtful arrangements, and

consideration for the possibilities of the given instrumentation. A strong, punchy tone emerged from Parzen-Johnson's baritone, propelled by intricate melodic lines and periodic ascents into the upper register of the horn while wisely and conspicuously staying out of Garabedian's bass register. "After The Almonds Fell", another quirky-titled Garabedian composition, elicited some tasty hand drumming on the snare and a funky beat from Ewing. Garabedian facilitated the proceedings with solid all-around bass playing and an authoritative tone.

Parzen-Johnson's composition "Stretches" provided an ideal vehicle to do just what the tune's name implies – stretch out. A blistering solo emanated from the baritone saxophone as Parzen-Johnson revealed a prodigious technical grasp of the instrument. "Yatra", a more abstract piece by Garabedian, featured some communicative interplay amongst the musicians, particularly baritone and drums at the outset. Ewing supplied a strong drum solo near the song's conclusion to bring the band back in. The performance came to an end with "When You Listen", a mid-tempo tune in 5/4 by Parzen-Johnson that highlighted a solo contribution from each member of the band.

Reed's Bass Drum is clearly a group looking for something, hungry for a new, individual sound – musical alchemists seeking out a formula to turn mundane materials into gold. The chase can be quite thrilling to watch. Reed's Bass Drum will continue to evolve and grow while developing a unique musical identity, and that is something we can all be excited about.

Django Reinhardt at 100! The Iridium, New York City February 1-3, 2010

By *Joe Lang*

Excitement was in the air at The Iridium for a celebration of the centennial of the birth of the legendary gypsy jazz guitarist Django Reinhardt. Stratta Philips Productions has been producing Django festivals for over ten years, events that feature many of the outstanding musicians who have been carrying on the gypsy jazz tradition that was popularized by Reinhardt and his associates beginning in the 1930s.

The lineup for the Iridium gig was Dorado Schmitt on lead guitar, Samson Schmitt on rhythm guitar, Brian Torff on bass, Marcel Loeffler on accordion and Pierre Blanchard on violin, with special guest appearances by vocalist Curtis Stigers, guitarist Ted Gottsegen and cellist Borislav Strulev.

The Schmitts, Torff and Loeffler opened the proceedings for the second set on February 3 with two unannounced selections. The first started out as a sweet ballad that evolved into a hot swing number featuring Dorado Schmitt. Loeffler was the focus of the second piece, a frenetic rhythmic excursion.

With the arrival of Blanchard and his violin,