

## Jazz, Urban Renewal Intertwined at Quebec City Festival

If jazz festivals have become commonplace in North America, it's still rare to find a nascent one that is driving and reflecting the transformation of an urban neighborhood.

In its fourth year, the Quebec City Jazz Festival, which ran Sept. 29–Oct. 4, is now large enough to occupy four nights at the tony Palais Montcalm—a newly renovated concert hall perched above the ancient wall of the old city—but it remains the kind of local event that has the John Abercrombie Quartet playing what felt like a living-room concert. The intimate space is Largo, a restaurant opened by festival president Gino Ste-Marie in 2003, when the neighborhood of Saint-Roch was still in the throes of urban decay. Now, the area—in particular the central Rue Saint-Joseph—is bouncing back and the club is the heart of the revival.

That was clear from the communal feeling in the sold-out room for Abercrombie, violinist Mark Feldman, drummer Joey Baron and bassist Thomas Morgan, who responded with two sets of rich interaction and sudden dynamic tidal shifts. Playing with minimal amplification, Feldman mined deep veins of emotion while Abercrombie introduced subtle textural changes to his signature sound. Baron maintained tension throughout, exploding in a prolonged, roiling calypso beat that had the band evoking its inner Sonny Rollins and Abercrombie reeling off a particularly ripe solo.

At the opposite end of Saint-Joseph, in a spare, garage-like nightclub, the Montreal-based Evidence Trio channeled Thelonious Monk through the distinctive wit of saxophonist Jean Derome and drummer Pierre Tanguay. While many musicians treat Monk with kid gloves, Derome, Tanguay and supple electric bassist Pierre Cartier never lost sight of the composer's humor, joyfully exercising the license to treat "Bright Mississippi," "Four In One" and "Brilliant Cor-

Mulgrew Miller (left), Ron Carter and Russell Malone



ners" as improvisational vehicles.

If only the Mingus Dynasty had brought as much gusto to their namesake's music. With trumpeter Tatum Greenblatt and trombonist Andy Hunter joining regular saxophonists Craig Handy and Seamus Blake in the septet's front line, the band sounded listless through much of its opening set, catching fire only in the closing "Ysabel's Table Dance." Prior to that point the musicians resembled players in a pickup football game, conferencing frequently and diagramming plays with hand gestures. The second set was a radical departure, beginning with an explosive solo by Handy on John Stubblefield's arrangement of "Pedal Point Blues" and concluding with an unannounced Kurt Elling appearance for "Goodbye Pork Pie Hat." Going for broke from the opening stanza, Elling left everything he had on the stage, sweating profusely and stretching his voice through its full range.

Two nights later in the same venue, Charles

Lloyd was in beautiful voice, too. Playing only tenor, he led his estimable quartet—pianist Jason Moran, bassist Reuben Rogers and drummer Eric Harland—through a perfectly structured main set. Beginning in a funky vein and ending with a raucous version of "Passin' Thru," the band was spirited and singularly focused. But an earnest reading of the prayer-like "Tagi," with Lloyd seated beside Moran at the piano and Harland intoning dark vocals, was anti-climactic.

Less dramatic but just as polished was Ron Carter, leading a trio of pianist Mulgrew Miller and guitarist Russell Malone. Playing a borrowed bass, Carter's tone was exceptionally bright, accentuating the lead role he assumed throughout his performance. The usually volatile Malone was held in check, save for the occasional wry quote, such as a particularly apt reference to Charlie Christian's "Seven Come Eleven" solo. Carter showed his mastery on a heartfelt "My Funny Valentine," which moved from bolero to blues. —James Hale