

At least we got a taste of the stuff.

JazFX, Downtown Blues Band, FHS Show Band and Teresa Malefant reviewed.

Kwame Dawes

They tell me that this was not the first jazz festival in Fredericton. They also tell me that Fredericton has seen the likes of Oscar Peterson on stage along with a wide range of jazz luminaries. They tell me, however, that the Harvest Jazz and Blues Festival represents the biggest, pure jazz festival that has come to this city. For about twenty years prior to 1983, Fredericton hosted a Chamber Music and Jazz Festival each year which at its zenith ran for two weeks and culminated in a grand ball. The fact is that Frederictonians are no strangers to jazz festivals so we shouldn't at all be surprised that this year's event did as well as it did. Everybody has been wearing the T-shirts which sold like hot-cakes during the weekend and all we can hear on the radio, in the newspapers and on the streets is how wonderful an idea it was.

The organizers were wise. They staged it a week into the term. Students think they are rich and consequently become careless with their money. The organizers managed to convince a few club managers (with the noticeable exception of Matt Harris at the Social Club) to host a number of the bands. The combination of media hype (CBC and *The Gleaner* got right in on the action) and the tone of good family entertainment and sheer preppy novelty went over well with the Fredericton crowd. Top that off with the involvement of a good "home-girl" gone stellar, Holly Cole, and you have the ingredients for a show that could not fail in this city.

The gods appear to have been impressed with the importance of this event and so ensured that excellent weather prevailed until the grey hues of Sunday afternoon when the Fredericton High School Show Band packed up their stuff and left the stage in Officer's Square after a subdued but competent performance. The organizers were full of smiles. "We broke even on Saturday morning," one of them pointed out. "The rest is gravy." "Next year, next year, even bigger."

Few people managed to see all the acts. The list was impressive and daunting. I for one, managed to catch only one indoor event. On Saturday I took time to watch the free out-door events which included the FHS Show Band, The Downtown Blues Band with a list of guest artists, and a pick-up blues unit that did their impromptu thing outside the Justice Building on Saturday morning. I also managed to catch a wonderful storyteller in the Exhibition Centre that morning.

On Friday night JazFX played to an incongruous looking audience in the Student Union Cafeteria. The room was filled with preppy types and older folks who sat still and listened to the restrained renditions of this experienced group of Jazz musicians. JazFX is made up of six musicians: an alto saxophonist Greg Carter, a trombone player, Gene Smith, who appears to lead the band, a trumpet player Paul Mazzo, a bass player, Skip Beckwith, a guitarist, John McLean, and the inevitable drummer, Terry Mahoney. Their format is standard jazz: the entire band plays the central theme, horns carrying most of the leads, and then they break it down to solos for each musician. While there is a painful monotony in this arrangement of some of the tunes, it gives the listener a chance to discover more about the abilities and the personalities of all the musicians.

I listen to jazz with the eye of a film-goer or a television watcher and in a community that is somehow convinced that Jazz is not dance music it is this element of psychological creativity that makes listening to musicians explore interlocking melodies and counterpointing musical lines entertaining. JazFX supplied me with ample fodder for my image bank. "Cartwheeler", an original number, for instance, evoked in my mind a narrative that incorporated images of childhood playfulness, long green landscapes, a cricket ball smelling of linseed oil, and emotional conflicts between lovers discovering their sexuality and sentimentality. The saxophone solo counterpointed its cliched romanticism with discord and irony which inverted many of these images, while the trombone was steady and predictable throughout. Standing like a tree strongly rooted and bombarded by waves of musical winds, the guitarist John McLean, let loose a series of sensitively rendered licks that were emotionally riveting and terribly plaintive in their evocation of the most morbid of blue notes. The soloists were fortunate to be working atop a rhythm section that anchored the mood swings. Sometimes vanishing completely into the background, bass player Skip Beckwith would at times remind us of his presence by tossing in a run just where the space begged for it.

The list of numbers included an impressive array of originals, most of them fairly introspective and melodic. "Blues for Harvest" in particular, (a composition by Greg Carter) displayed both the strengths and weaknesses of the unit. With the rhythm section playing a flawless blues lockstep syncopation, the solos were forced to find the mood of the number. Both the trumpet and trombone work was flat and rhythmically uninspired. These guys are impressive on fast numbers but on the easy blues material, they fall away into predictable and mechanical runs. Sadly, technical ability must be subordinate to sheer feel when it comes to jazz. The contrast was startling when Greg Carver on saxophone soloed. He displayed a capacity to let the rhythm section work for him, creating a composition that established a clear structural pattern of lifts and falls. This was taken up by the wonderful work on the guitar by John McLean - sometimes falling into the mudd-

waters blues of the South and then breaking out into latino patterns

A Thelonius Monk number was attempted with guitar substituting for the piano chording that one comes to expect from Monk. At best, this was a lacklustre rendition of Monk. The horns lacked the aggression during their ensemble moments while the soloing rarely recreated the precarious danger and desperation counterpointed by plaintive melodies, that one associates with Monk's music.

JazFX is an accomplished unit, and they gave a show that was eye-opening for what it said about the appeal of jazz in the Maritimes. Apparently their performances on Friday night were a lot looser than this Thursday night show. I wish I could have seen them then. JazFX have released a self-titled album that should be worth checking out as well.

On Saturday morning, I saw Ed Kavanaugh tell stories to kids with such *joie-de-vivre* and professional skill that I was encouraged about the presence of yet another brilliant story-teller in the city. We have lost Sheri Fitch to Halifax but we have gained Ed Kavanaugh whose tales contain myth, mystery, music and humor. He plays the guitar well and composes catchy songs that are not overly sentimental or unintelligent as is the wont of many children writers. He has recorded some of his songs and has published three books of children's stories and a collection of plays for children. His rapport with the children was impressive.

Afterwards I was drawn by the sound of jazz music to the Justice Building. Swing, swing and more swing. This was a show band with the standard show tunes. A high school band whose members showed a tremendous competence on their instruments even if they seemed rather bored with what they were playing. The Fredericton High School Band has an impressive list of recent alumni and a few of them sat-in on the sessions during the Festival infusing skill and professionalism into the band's sound. The band-leader, Hugh Kennedy conducted the band with rigid and self-conscious hand-claps. If this was a mute film-clip, the viewer would be convinced that the band sounded like a bunch of youth trying really hard to get their act together. Turn-up the sound and s/he would be pleasantly surprised. The saxophone section did not squeak as is the wont of many a school jazz band. The instrumentalist were well-rehearsed and showed competence on their instruments. With Eric Bourque, the much celebrated Fredericton teenage saxophone whiz in on the session, the unit sounded crisp and controlled.

Bourque's solo work on "Misty" was especially tasteful with just a hint of the wildness that he displays when jamming with the more experimental Cosmic Quartet. Contained like this in what is essentially a no-ego set-up, Bourque displays his capacity to handle standards with standard precision and only suggestive idiosyncratic interpretations. Other alumni who supported the unit were Tim Rideout on drums, Keith Lutes on piano and Willy Davidson on bass. The band performed with gusto compositions like "Sweet Georgia Brown", "Spain", "Janine", "The Old Road", "On the Street Where You Live" and "Valero". The FHS Band is essentially a show band and is best suited for dances. Swing is their forte. When I saw them in the park they looked somewhat burntout and unenthusiastic about their music. As soon as their set was over, the musicians seemed to relax and to assume very contented demeanors. Maybe they were nervous. Too bad. They were good enough to feel free to strut their stuff with the arrogance and pleasure that comes with confidence in one's ability to handle an instrument well.


After half an hour of setting up woes during which time I entertained myself watching kids teeter precariously on the edge of the fountain, an impromptu nameless "blues" unit began to play. Joel LeBlanc (Mess O' Blues) on harp led the band through a series of incomprehensible and poorly executed blues numbers. LeBlanc is a good harp player and Trishan Pymm (lead guitar) is hardly an incompetent but lacks the discipline needed to anchor the deceptively loose blues style. Brent Dinsmore's bass playing was steady but uninspired and the alto saxophone playing of Tom Richards was buried by Joel LeBlanc's intrusive and over-miked harp playing. As should be obvious by my above comments, this band did not impress me. Pick up units are extremely unpredictable things and they rely on the artists respect for the music they are playing and for each other's abilities. These cats seemed as disjointed as total strangers coming together to play numbers they

did not really know. As non virtuosos musicians these fellows would have been better served rehearsing a little before going out on the street to do the blues a disservice. Lightweight stuff at best.

I caught the Down Town Blues Band later that day. I arrived to the strains of Billy Holiday's "God bless the Child" sung by someone whose name I didn't get. The voice was a bit too operatic for the piece, but then its all jazz really. Good sound in Officers Square combined with the inevitable energy of the Downtown Blues Band, and their apparent conviction that doing rhythm blues is the most natural thing in world for them to do, made the show entertaining. I had a few surprises. Their lead guitarist, a chap called Gallant really impressed me with the confidence and technical skill in his rendition of a Stevie Ray Vaughan number. It is obvious that this musician has been working hard at honing his skills and he has added to that a dose of confidence which is easily justified by his playing. The last time I saw him on stage, he tried to remain buried in the background. This was nearly a year ago. He is out and cooking these days. When the band was joined by Teresa Malefant to rip through a rendition of "Si-Si Rider" (spelling is questionable), Gallant cooked along happily, finding the right bluesy stylings for the number. Malefant's short stay was wonderful. She has tremendous stage presence and as soon as her rhythm section (who sat in for this number) kicked into the railroad driving quality of rocking blues, you knew things would be happening. She sings with the sauciness and conviction of a blues woman. She dominates the stage and leads the band. I am sorry I did not catch her own show later that night.

The band was joined, also, by Carrol Adams, better known as a broadcaster. She sings well with just a little too much daring for her vocal range. But the guts were there and the aggression in her voice served as a pleasant counterpoint to her full black leather motif outfit. The Blues Band did their standard R and B type tunes. The female singer in the band successfully handled a rendition of Holly Cole's "Girls Talk". The tune is poppy jazz with only a touch of vulnerability. On the most part it is pure wit, pure surface almost like a wall of protection. It was interesting to hear someone else attempt the song.


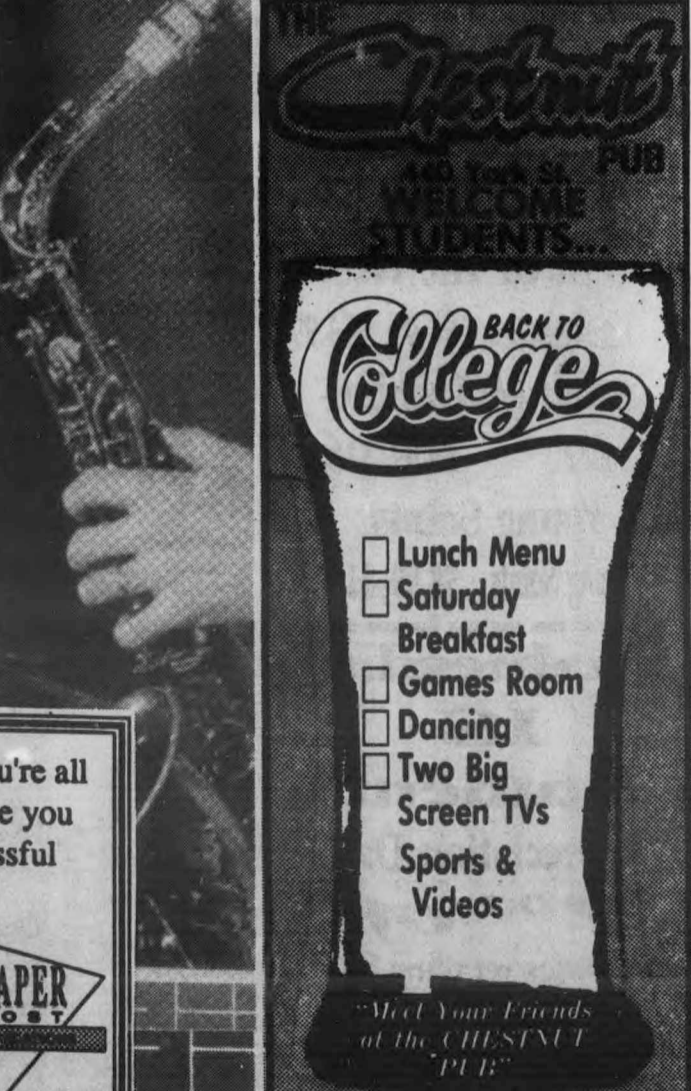
I left the Square before Frank Davis was to appear. I can say that I enjoyed the music a great deal despite a few less than impressive moments. Fredericton should do the same thing next year, but this time they should try and find a wider range of jazz and blues musicians who have been doing this stuff all their life. We have only had a taste of Jazz and Blues this time around. On the most part it has been rather tame and safe stuff. Maybe that is all this city can handle, but if we hope to attract a bigger and more sophisticated audience to these festivals we will have to think about getting some grit in the system.



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