

Tauranga Musica Concert Review

Ol' King Cole Trio

Sunday 26th June, Baycourt Exhibition Space

How serendipitous that the stars should align on Matariki weekend for both the Tauranga Jazz Festival and Tauranga Musica's Ol' King Cole piano trio to coincide. For those whose appetite wasn't quite satiated by the week's Jazz Festival events, concert goers were treated to a musical feast in the Baycourt Exhibition Space on Sunday afternoon by the remarkable Wellington-based Ol' King Cole trio.

Comprised of piano/vocalist Louis Thompson-Munn, double-bassist Phoebe Johnson, and drummer Hikurangi Schaverien-Kaa, the trio presented a programme of the very best of Nat 'King' Cole's early trio-based hits (as opposed to the later lushly-orchestrated hits such as "Unforgettable"). To say the Ol' King Cole trio is simply a cover band would be to seriously underestimate and dismiss the outstanding talents and skills brimming from this ensemble. This is a trio of performers boasts a veritable embarrassment of creative and virtuosic talent. Their combined improvisational abilities alone set these musicians in the same starry heights as Diana Krall and the Harry Connick Jr. Trio.

The trio opened with an instrumental Cole Porter standard that introduced each member of the trio one at a time, beginning with a whimsical riff by Thompson-Munn on the piano. What was immediately obvious was the incredibly special sense of ensembledness that exists for these players. So transportive is the power of their sound, we listeners were instantly taken to another time and place.

The concert's first half included classic standards such as *Gee Baby, Ain't I Good to You* (begun almost as a ballad before taking off into a swing), *Sweet Lorraine* and a rather clever arrangement of *Nature Boy* which made the inspired move to a light Latin beat during the solo sections before returning to the swing beat with which it began.

Of particular note were the inclusion of the lesser-known numbers *Best Man* and *Meet Me at No Place Special* in the first half set. While the trio continued to impress with seemingly-endless volumes of creativity throughout their improvised solos, the musicianship took a momentary backseat in both these numbers to Cole's almost-Wildean lyrics which are both witty and cheeky.

To begin the second set of the afternoon, the trio opened with an instrumental arrangement of the standard made famous by Fats Waller, *Lulu's Back in Town*. What began as almost a slow ballad featuring the sensitive improvisations of Thompson-Munn on the piano, moved into a fast swing which showcased the singularly creative and improvisatory talents of Schaverien-Kaa on the drums.

Also featured in the second half set were the ballads *What Can I Say After I Say I'm Sorry* which contained some rather soft and tender singing from Thompson-Munn and *Don't Let Your Eyes Go Shopping for Your Heart*, the preachy lyrics to which have not lost their relevance over the years.

The highlight of *Honeysuckle Rose*, it could be said, was not so much the music itself as the sheer enjoyment and playful chemistry radiating from the trio on stage throughout. Appropriately, the concert ended with Cole's robust *Route 66* in which the improvisational talents of Thompson-Munn were on full

display for an extremely appreciative audience. The trio certainly saved their best energies for this final number to which this reviewer must defer to Nat Cole himself for the final word - unforgettable!

While an early music specialist might seem to stick out at a jazz concert like a giraffe wearing dark sunglasses trying to get into a polar bears only golf club, there is a powerful (and oft-forgotten) musical thread which forever links Handel to the world of jazz – the unmistakable creativity and skill required to improvise. Although different musical languages and centuries apart, the skill set hasn't much changed and as such, one is in awe and utter appreciation for this unique and imaginative skill abounding in these three musicians.

The Ol' King Cole Trio is certainly chamber music with a difference. Thank you Tauranga Musica for capping off this Matariki weekend with such style. We look forward to returning once again to the Baycourt Exhibition Space for the upcoming Hammers and Horsehair concert on Sunday, August 28th.

Chalium Poppy