

Leeds Jazz 25th Birthday Celebration

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Leeds Jazz 25th Birthday Celebration @ Seven Arts, Chapel Allerton, Leeds

Given the recent announcement that Leeds Jazz will cease operations after the current season of concerts finishes on 26 November, this birthday celebration had more than a tinge of sadness about it. The majority of the musicians who played in the four night stretch of concerts (sadly only two of which I managed to attend) have played on Leeds Jazz stages many times, although not necessarily in the same combinations, and had been specially invited by the Committee members. But although the promoters have gained a reputation for staging spectacular shows by some of the biggest names in international jazz, the line up is made up almost exclusively of British and European musicians.

For the birthday concert itself on the Saturday night, the increasingly irascible avant-blues-punk guitarist Billy Jenkins acted as MC, mixing his anarchic but perfectly timed wisecracks with some equally random but precisely judged guitar playing. Jenkins builds his first slot around rambling reminiscences on Leeds Jazz down the years ('so many drummers, so little time...') before introducing the Jan Kopinski Trio. Saxophonist Kopinski has led his helter skelter jazz-punk outfit Pinski Zoo for more than 25 years but in recent years has branched out to try more varied soundscapes. This trio, completed by Kopinski's son Stephan on electric bass and Led Bib drummer Mark Holub, can do restrained but they're always keen to move to more stirring, vibrant passages. And despite a broken foot, its Kopinski senior that does most of the pushing, ably assisted by a range of effects pedals distorting his sound, reaching for the strong, passionate and simple fanfare like themes that are his trademark.

After a shorter, last ever Leeds Jazz spot from Jenkins, singer Christine Tobin and guitarist Phil Robson suffuse Seven with cool sophistication. Tobin has a rich, resonant voice and brings a heady sensuality to the intimate confines of the room. If Tobin sang regular love songs the effect would probably be unbearable but her choice of covers and her own arrangements and originals are anything but regular. So, a cover of Leonard Cohen's languidly cynical 'Everybody Knows' is paradoxically given a sinister warmth, while her setting of Paul Muldoon's poem 'Horses' gives the dreamlike lyric flesh and blood. Robson uses looping and effects to provide sparse but by no means minimal support, with Tobin's free flowing scat singing matching the guitarist's solos.

Sunday night was given over to Welsh pianist Huw Warren's Hermeto+, his most recent and critically lauded project that pays homage to idiosyncratic Brazilian musician Hermeto Pascoal. The CD features Warren in a trio with Peter Herbert on bass and Martin France on drums but the pianist augmented the line up exclusively for this gig with saxophonist Julian Arguelles and guitarist John Paricelli. The quintet play a mixture of Pascoal compositions and Warren original's inspired by the Brazilians music. As Warren himself points out, Pascoal writes magical, effortlessly swinging music suffused with Brazilian rhythms that Warren and Herbert in particular are more than happy to stick their teeth into. Pascoal's joyful tunes, ably assisted by Warren compositions such as 'DP & C' and 'Cowboys and Shepherds', turn the celebrations into a party. But it's two reflective duets that prove to be the highlights - the piano and soprano sax of 'Desencontro Certo', a solo piano piece on the CD, and the piano and bass of the spellbinding 'Santa Caterina'.

As a celebration it may have been a little low key but the music made it anything but sad.

Steve Walsh

<http://www.leedsjazz.org.uk/>

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