

Hot Club of Detroit performs at Oberlin, collaborates with Oberlin's PI Ensembles (October 9)

by Jarrett Hoffman



This past Thursday, October 9, Oberlin welcomed acclaimed jazz group Hot Club of Detroit for the first Performance and Improvisation (PI) guest recital of the year. Clonick Hall was packed for the occasion, all seats filled and its back wall lined with listeners. Three impressive student ensembles kicked off the evening, each of them featuring Hot Club of Detroit accordionist Julien Labro. Then, for the second half of the night, the group tore through a set full of stunning solos and duets, particularly from Labro and group founder and lead guitarist Evan Perri.

Hot Club of Detroit steamed with comfort and coolness, showing off the familiarity and self-assurance of a band that knows what it's doing.

They began with *Pour Parler*, by jazz guitarist Romane, which saw Perri spin out an elaborate solo, spicing it up with chordal work toward the end. Then the equally impressive Labro took over with a solo full of big leaps and accordion slides.

Indeed the set was full of stunning solos, but their effect grew less and less jaw-dropping as the concert went on, as Perri and Labro seemed more focused on virtuosity than variety. Soloistic input from bassist Jordan Schug was refreshing.

Showing off the group's best was its take on Django Reinhardt's *Speevey*. It featured vivid interplay between Schug and Labro, with Perri sneaking into the conversation and rhythm guitarist Koran Agan rapping his guitar in commentary. Constantly evolving, the piece traversed sections abrasive, pointillist, racing, and dancing. Perri joked afterwards, "That wasn't quite like Django's version, but there's a little bit in there."

What never grew tiresome was hearing Perri and Labro riff off each other. Especially on *Pour Parler*, their duet-based sections saw brilliance bounce off improvisational brilliance, two virtuosos reacting to each other's musical language.

Labro carried that concept over to his collaboration with the student PI ensembles, putting together one of the evening's highlights in a duet with soprano saxophonist Max Bessesen. Performing a Labro arrangement of *Au Lait*, by Pat Metheny and Lyle Mays as part of the final PI group to perform, Bessesen and Labro (trading his accordion for the melodica-like accordina) traded long solos of their own. They gradually began to interweave, taking shorter solos, then interjecting, finishing the other's sentences or boldly changing the subject—a scene of old pals recalling stories they happen to remember differently.

Before the concert, director Jamey Haddad, Professor of Advanced Improvisation and Percussion at Oberlin, told the audience that this year's groups have been more internally directed. Indeed the first group on the program played a song written by one of its own: *Lying Gently* by pianist Jackson Laskey. Guitarist Noah Gershwin and clarinetist Ana Nelson were standouts in the contemplative tune. The second group, performing the Labro-arranged *Lôro* by Egberto Gismonti, featured inspired solos from clarinetist Giovanni Bertoni and percussionists Patrick Graney and Danny Frank.

Labro gave a short speech before the third group's performance in which he emphasized what a special program PI is, a bridge between the classical and jazz worlds. "I've been to other universities, and they don't have anything like it," he said. He looked around at the group and told them he hopes he'll cross tracks with them again in the real world of music. With their exceptional talent, as well as the influence of Labro, Hot Club of Detroit, and PI itself, you wouldn't bet against these students to get there.

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