

## Saturday night at Tri-C Jazz Fest: Snarky Puppy, José James & Common (June 30)

by Alice Koeninger



Despite its title, Tri-C Jazz Fest deviated from true jazz to more pop styles of music on the evening of Saturday, June 30. Snarky Puppy began their sold-out set around 6:00 pm in the Ohio Theatre. The large audience included entire families, all excited to hear this Grammy-award winning band perform.

Bassist Michael League, drummer Larnell Lewis, percussionist Marcelo Woloski, keyboardists Shaun Martin and Bobby Sparks, trumpeter and keyboardist Justin Stanton, trumpeter Mike Maher, saxophonist and flutist Chris Bullock, and guitarist Mark Lettieri formed one grooving organism. Members walked casually offstage when they had longer rests, but the music never faltered. League, considered to be the leader and founder of Snarky Puppy, remained onstage the whole time along with Lettieri, Sparks, and Lewis, who seemed to form both the core of the band and the music itself.

When not playing keys, Martin provided frequent entertainment, gesticulating in the air with his fingers as if painting the notes as they stemmed from sax and trumpet. Each ensemble member was able to showcase their obvious talent in a solo or two as the band flowed easily from jazz to blues to funk to rock, a commercial and widely-appealing fusion.



José James opened for Common in the Keybank State Theatre, inciting similar enthusiasm in the audience. Currently touring his project “Lean On Me: José James Celebrates Bill Withers,” James came out in a knee-length, blue-and-green-striped coat and sunglasses under his afro. Bill Withers would have turned 80 on the 4th, and James said that he wanted to tour with Withers’ music because he felt the country needed its connections and its message now more than ever.

It was clear that he knew how to put on a show as he crooned into the microphone, strummed briefly on his guitar, tapped his feet, and moved his hips around the stage singing favorites such as *Ain’t No Sunshine* and *Grandma’s Hands*. The sunglasses came off for *Lean on Me*, which featured a jazzy piano solo by Takeshi Okioshi. Though James has a beautiful voice, he tended to flatten out phrases and lacked the emotional depth that many associate with Withers’ songs.

After walking offstage during an tight drum solo by Nate Smith (bassist Ben Williams and guitarist Brad Allen Williams made up the rest of the band), James returned in a different outfit: patchwork jeans and a similar poncho-like shirt. A melodic and thought-provoking bass solo led into the last song, *Lovely Day*, which had the audience standing and dancing. James even stepped down from the stage to dance with one of the

female audience members closest to him (see above photo). For fans of Withers and of James, it was a fun show.



Common's band waited for him onstage for a few minutes before he appeared in lime-green pants, sitting on a stool with his back to the audience. A Nat King Cole sample played as the lights went up on his bald head, then Common stepped off the stool with strong energy to begin *I Used to Love H.E.R.* The concert was centered around Common's story, from his youth on the South side of Chicago, to the birth of his daughter, to a rough breakup with his girlfriend and baby mama, to his move to NYC and trips to Philly, all the way up to the present, ending with *Glory*, the song he wrote with John Legend for the movie *Selma*.

Common's vigor and flow were consistent throughout the show, and he was a good storyteller as he told the audience all about his life. Despite a few awkward points, like when he invited a woman from the audience on stage and kissed her and hit on her in front of everyone, or when he

dedicated songs "to the ladies," saying "where my ladies at?," the concert was entertaining and well-thought out. It was definitely fun to watch him freestyle to the woman from the audience, no matter how strange the situation felt at the time.

Vocalist Muhsinah Abdul Karim added texture to songs throughout the concert with her smooth voice. Her best vocals came on *The Day Women Took Over*, which describes Common's fantasy world run by women who accomplish world peace. The greatest song by far was *Black America Again*, which came out in 2016 and shows Common's political awareness and eloquent lyricism in a direct delivery. "Now you want your 'hoods back," he declared, commenting on gentrification, something of which many Clevelanders are well aware.

The tour through Common's discography made it clear that this hip-hop legend has a solid style, steady flow, and is an optimist who ultimately means well.

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