

## Tri-C JazzFest 2021 (September 11-12)

by Peter Feher



Tri-C JazzFest was back in the swing of things this summer. After a 2020 season of virtual performances, the festival returned to an all-star, in-person lineup this year, thanks to some patient planning. The date was pushed from June to September, and the venue shifted from Playhouse Square to an all-outdoor space, Cain Park.



The result was maybe a more relaxed setup but with no less serious music-making. Ten mainstage acts made up the schedule for the 42nd annual Festival, and if there was a connecting thread through this diverse lineup, it was that artistry always came first.

21-year-old vocalist Samara Joy opened day one (September 11) with an assured set of standards. Joy graduated from college in May and released her debut album in July, and the tunes she stuck to Saturday — never scating but playing generously with melody — were the natural extension of these milestones.

Guitarist Pasquale Grasso, who championed Joy at SUNY Purchase and on her first recording, led the backing trio with effortless cool.

Like many gifted young artists, Joy has a stellar ear that occasionally errs on the side of imitation. She introduced “If You Could See Me Now” as a Sarah Vaughan number and all but recreated that singer’s lower-register richness. Another diva’s signature stylings — Carmen McRae’s front-of-nose sound — rubbed off on Joy’s delivery of “If You Never Fall in Love With Me.” The set’s closer, “Everything Happens to Me,” offered an instructive difference, with Joy finding a smoothness all her own.



The stage got busy Saturday evening with two large ensembles. First up was A Moment in Cleveland, led by trumpeter Dominick Farinacci, who shepherded the group’s dozen-plus members in various configurations. Local players were the backbone of Tri-C JazzFest’s online concerts last year, and it was great to see these same musicians get a mainstage slot to themselves in 2021.

The Cleveland pianists were the standouts on this sometimes sprawling but always enthusiastic program. Jackie Warren pulled off an impressive balancing act — both starring as soloist and driving the rhythm section — in an infectious Latin number. Lafayette Carthon soloed in variations on “Amazing Grace” that started solemnly but took on the chord-pounding proportions of a piano concerto by the end.



The Spanish Harlem Orchestra kept the volume up in its set. Pianist and composer Oscar Hernández cued the 13-piece ensemble, a group of equals whose members, from the trumpet to the cowbell, moved as one. SHO’s three vocalists were less soloists, more just another sound in the salsa texture (though singer Jeremy Bosch picked up the flute for one number and showed off some serious improvisational chops).

The full-throttle approach — “bringing the heat,” as Hernández said, in contrast to the cooler jazz earlier in the day — had some of the audience out of their seats and dancing to end the evening.



Things were back to cool Sunday afternoon. With a hipster quartet, trumpeter and vocalist Bria Skonberg played a set that charted some of the trends not just in jazz, but in new music generally. She juxtaposed various competing styles (vaudeville, avant-garde, singer-songwriter) and added a political message to boot.

The effect was contradictory: quirky but calculated. Skonberg clearly has technique to burn, but her project takes a toll on the music. On trumpet, she's always on the move, rarely holding long notes. Singing, she sometimes limits herself unnecessarily. "From This

Moment On" kept her voice in a small, smoky register. But in "Blackout," she burst forth with a three-octave range, and some of the best singing of the weekend.



More musical highlights came from unexpected places on Sunday. Colombian harpist Edmar Castañeda and Swiss harmonica player Grégoire Maret were "Harp vs. Harp," a surprisingly versatile duo. Castañeda, playing a 34-string "arpa llanera," was the rhythmic and harmonic engine, while Maret, on the "mouth harp," took the solo/vocal line.

Virtuoso passages on both harps had a certain highwire thrill, but just as engaging was a slow, lazy number, filled with pitch bends and moving, melancholy harmonies.

This year's JazzFest closed out in traditional fashion though. Vocalist Catherine Russell guided listeners through a set of old tunes, some standards, some gems. A little history preceded each song — a piece of songwriting trivia or maybe a family story (Russell's bonafides go back to her parents, both movers and shakers on the jazz scene).



But Russell was ultimately shaping a living legacy here, and she had the whole festival standing on its shoulders by her final number.

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