

## Tri-C JazzFest finds its groove at Playhouse Square (first of three reviews)

by Jacob Strauss



With food trucks lined up on E. 14th Street by the Strassman Insurance Stage on Euclid, Tri-C JazzFest was hitting its groove on Friday, June 24.

Cats on Holiday, a swamp pop band from Cleveland wearing Hawaiian shirts, was playing on the outdoor stage when I arrived. There was an accordion player with a crawdad printed on the bellows, and a man

playing spoons on a washboard, who, in a moment of poetry, said there is redemption and grace and love in carrying pain, and that is why the perseverance of the people of Cleveland is special.

After eating a Po'boy from The Dawg Bowl Cajun food truck, I caught the first half of Brian Culbertson's show in The Connor Palace Theatre. Playing to a packed house of enthusiastic fans, whom he thanked for their love and support throughout his career, he put on an excellent show full of lights and well-designed choreography. His band played with exuberance and swagger.

Back out on the street, The Jazz Kitchen was whipping up some food, and kids playing in the Tri-C JazzFest Academy Ensemble walked around with their instruments, either going to or coming from a performance at the Next Gen Stage. "A Tribute to Eddie Baccus Sr.," a longtime fixture of the Cleveland Jazz scene who passed away earlier this



year, was wrapping up. Walter Barnes Jr. and Friends, veterans of the festival, took the stage not long after.

Headed by Snarky Puppy's percussion duo of Robert "Sput" Seawright and Nate Werth, Ghost-Note brought the funk to the Mimi Ohio Theater. Energy was high — it didn't feel right to be sitting down and not dancing to the music.

Seawright laid it down with drive, precision, and enthusiasm, leading a seasoned group of players. Threading groovy licks throughout the music were Peter Knudson on guitar and Dwayne "MonoNeon" Thomas on bass. Inventive solos were added to the mix by Danny Wytabis on trombone and Jonathan Mones on sax. And Dominique Xavier Taplin was masterful on the keys. Alone onstage at one point, he delivered an atmospheric improvisation which evolved into a House beat once the band rejoined him.



By the end of the show, they asked the crowd to get up and dance — they wanted to connect with the audience, because that's how the music is supposed to live. And with the inspiration of James Brown and Sly and the Family Stone, it would be downright offensive to disagree with that philosophy.

Their musicianship, with its unrelenting pace and joy, was superb. If we had been in a venue with standing room, I would have been moving without any inhibitions the entire time.

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