

Greatness In Our Midst

Cecil McBee's Quartet

Yarmouth High School

October 2, 2004

From time to time the jazz bassist and promoter Paul Brown has told me about his tours of Japan and Korea. There, he says, players find audiences whose knowledge of the music rivals that of the most experienced American critics. Above all, these fans are passionate about jazz and jazz players – very passionate and more. Mr. Brown came to mind just off the highway exit on the way to Cecil McBee's concert in Yarmouth on October 2nd. There sat a series of real-estate open-house boards bearing the legend, "Cecil McBee —>" Lo and behold, if you showed up late you missed the gate – the Yarmouth High School auditorium was sold out. That clearly meant a lot to the bassist, who was noticeably moved by the reception afforded him by the usually stoic coastal town.

It couldn't happen to a more deserving musician or at a better time. In the 1970s and 80s Cecil McBee was a mainstay of New York's modern jazz scene, participating in some of the era's landmark records and leading at least six albums under his own name. His driving sound fueled Chico Freeman's Destiny's Dance, which brought the avant-garde saxophonist alongside twenty-year-old budding jazz master Wynton Marsalis. The bassist also lent his hands, ears and composer's pen to McCoy Tyner's Quartets – 4x4 which featured the Tyner Trio backing John Abercrombie, Freddie Hubbard, Bobby Hutcherson and the alto saxophone explorer Arthur Blythe. His ability to bridge the sometimes substantial gap between mainstream players and loft artists made Mr. McBee one of a handful of go-to players back in the day.

The bassist endured some difficult moments since then. Between family issues and a change in management, the phone got quiet for a while. Recently, though, Mr. McBee has re-emerged in some of jazz music's highest-profile bands. For the two years the bassist has propelled the Saxophone Summit Band – three tenor-players with familiar names like Liebman, Lovano and Brecker. That call also led to a tour supporting the triple-threat alto-sax front-line of Gary Bartz, Kenny Garrett and Vincent Herring.

The Yarmouth concert represented an opportunity for Mr. McBee to revive his dormant career as a bandleader. Characteristically, he built an ensemble with talent that crossed generations and genres. For a horn soloist, the call went to Charles Tolliver, veteran trumpeter of Louis Hayes, McCoy Tyner and Sonny Rollins' bands. The pianist George Cables, best known for his work in Dexter Gordon's final quartet, made the trip as well. Rounding out the band was the drummer Ralph Peterson, a large, fiery player now fronting his own exploratory Fo'tet. Each is a journeyman. They are too old to be young lions. They are not old enough to be aged icons (certainly not Mr. Peterson, who is in his young forties). None ever cracked the cultural barrier to achieve renown outside the jazz world. Yet each has lived a life on the jazz scene, going from band to band, tour to tour, night after night, set after set.

These are players who simply do not come to Maine. The economics just don't work. On the

one hand, although none makes an extravagant living, they need enough money to make it worthwhile to come up from New York. On the other hand, these names – while familiar in the jazz community – will not draw the Dave Brubeck and Diana Krall crowd. So essentially, for players on this level to appear in Maine somebody's gotta do somebody a favor. Here, we can surmise that Mr. McBee called in a solid or two to get the band up here for less than you'd care to admit. But we will never know for sure, and such considerations are outside the music in any event.

How does one of jazz' leading bassists come to play a concert to benefit Yarmouth Arts? For years, Mr. McBee has owned a camp on an island off Yarmouth. The phone doesn't always work and there's no piano. There is a double bass on hand but the proprietor doesn't generally perform in public: He comes to Maine to get away from the music, not to engage it. Nevertheless, this place of respite has given Mr. McBee a tie to the community. When a Yarmouth Arts board member called out of the blue and asked if there was any chance of a performance he graciously agreed.

The concert itself was nearly all that a fan of modern jazz could ask for, from Euphoria at the start to the blues close to the end. Seven of the ten pieces were by Mr. McBee, with each band-member performing one of their own originals as well. A few stand-out moments: Ralph Peterson bringing the compositional spirit of Woody Shaw into the house on Just For Today and the percussive spirit of his mentor, Art Blakey, to the closer, Wilpan's. Charles Tolliver catching fire in the midst of the McBee composition Sorta Kinda Blue. Slight George Cables coaxing a massive yet delicate sound from the piano on his Helen's Song. The bowed double bass solo on Euphoria and the intricate bass-and-drum work on Peace Maker, both McBee originals.

Above and beneath it all, the evening was about the assertive, subtle, modern, driving, tight, loose, musical sound of Cecil McBee and his friends at work. This is the kind of playing which, thirty years ago, launched me down the musical road I travel today. The sounds of George Cables and Charles Tolliver (and Bill Hardman and Frank Strozier and Junior Cook and Michael Carvin and Stafford James and Louis Hayes and Larry Willis and Victor Lewis and so many more) – the sounds of the journeymen who so often visited the stages of my youth and who so rarely appear now – that's what I came for. These days you have to search a bit to find that noise. But for me and several hundred lucky listeners at Yarmouth High School, those sounds resounded once more.

Here's to next time. Hold onto those road-signs.