

April 11, 2013

Ben Williams and Sound Effect bring new influences to jazz



PHOTOS BY ANNA MODEL '16

Sound Effect guitarist Matt Stevens, pianist Christian Sands, saxophonist Marcus Strickland and bassist Ben Williams (left to right) are all celebrated individual performers in their own right.

by Jack McManus '13

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

Instead of watching Syracuse fall to Michigan in their Final Four game, a passionate crowd of Hamilton jazz fans gathered in Wellin Hall on Saturday night for an impressive display of contemporary jazz from 28-year-old bassist Ben Williams and his group Sound Effect. Williams led the quintet through complex arrangements of his original tunes and some surprising covers, including songs by Stevie Wonder, the rap group N.E.R.D. and R&B songstress Goapele. Speaking candidly to the crowd between songs, Williams explained his philosophy of “new standards,” embracing these contemporary compositions in the same way that earlier Jazz artists like John Coltrane and Louis Armstrong adopted popular songs into their repertoires. Building on these new age attitudes, Williams and his band played an impressive, challenging set that clearly demonstrated the bright future of modern jazz.

After a brief introduction from Hamilton’s jazz patriarch Doc Woods, Williams took the stage wearing a skinny black tie and a matching flatbrim hat over his tied-up dreads—a symbol of youth culture that reflected his next-generation style. The first tune, a sparse take on N.E.R.D.’s rap-rock song “Fly or Die,” opened with a short polyrhythmic solo from drummer John Davis, who played a laid-down floor tom instead of a full-sized bass drum for a more resonant, subtle sound. Williams took the song’s central solo, climbing over the top of his acoustic double bass to briefly tease the melody of “My Favorite Things” from *The Sound of Music*, which Coltrane recorded for a 1961 album.

Williams addressed the audience for the first time after the cover, thanking them for choosing his concert over that night’s Final Four game and admitting that he’d be watching the game too if he weren’t performing.

His banter between songs gave the show an intimate, personal feel, which was undoubtedly boosted by the fact that most of the audience sat in temporary chairs on the stage itself, some only feet away from the musicians.

Saxophonist Marcus Strickland, who switched between several saxophones throughout the night, picked up his alto for the next song—a cover of the 1985 single “Part Time Lover” by universal favorite Stevie Wonder. Guitarist Matt Stevens stepped up for his first solo on the delicate tune, showing off his warm, buttery tone with quick, fluttery runs of notes. As on most songs, Williams took the second solo, mimicking Stevens’s fluttery phrasing.

Following two straight pop covers, Williams introduced his first original composition of the night, a tune called “Dawn

of the New Day” that featured a stately piano solo and a really interesting drum part that continuously evolved as Davis seamlessly incorporated new rhythmic ideas, never playing the same beat for more than a few measures. The group played several other originals over the course of the night, highlighting each musician’s wide range of talents and techniques.

Before launching into the last cover song of the night, a delicate take on the song “Things Don’t Exist” by Oakland, CA-based R&B singer Goapele, Williams paused to explain his outlook on incorporating songs by other young artists, even those in other genres and traditions, into his live concerts and recordings. Pointing to classic songs like “My Favorite Things” and “Summertime,” Williams explained that jazz artists have always looked to popular music for inspiration and source melodies for their progressive improvisation. Rather than simply recycling those established melodies, Williams expressed his passion for giving interesting new songs the same treatment, thereby creating a tradition of “new standards” for the rising generations of jazz players. The group’s performance of “Things Don’t Exist” showed just how effective this strategy could be, making the song fundamentally their own with some beautiful piano work from Christian Sands, while still preserving the spirit and melodic structure of the original.

With extended solos stretching out some tunes to longer than fifteen minutes, the seven song set ended up lasting a full hour and 40 minutes. Impressed by the engaging performance, the crowd thanked Williams and his band with a standing ovation after their especially expressive closing jam. Leaving the stage just before halftime of Syracuse’s losing effort, Ben Williams and Sound Effect offered an impressive look into the future of modern jazz. Wellin’s jazz offerings continue this coming Friday, April 12, with guitar duo Gene Bertocini and Rick Balestra. The free concert starts at 7:30 p.m.



Williams won the Thelonious Monk International Jazz Competition in 2009.

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Show Profile:

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Saturday, 11 a.m.

with

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and
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Glance '16

Sounds Like:

Have you ever seen *Hostel 2*? Imagine if that was music.

Expect to hear:

Buzzsaws, screams, Belgian, airhorns, zither and the most metal in the Mohawk Valley.

What song do you love (or love to hate) in the Diner Jukebox?

You probably haven’t heard of it—all the lyrics are in Danish.

This song goes out to...

All our haters: We see you, but we can’t hear you.

Albums or songs you can expect to hear:

Every single Gwar album.



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After his 2011 death, Gwar guitarist Flattus Maximus (aka Cory Smoot) has been replaced by Pustulus Maximus on their current tour.