

JazzNights (71)

Bill Charlap and Peter Washington



Years ago, when one talked of pianists, time after time one heard, “But you got to hear Charlap,” Of course, the listening world was just catching up, Bill Charlap had been around quite a while and playing great. Since then, as expected, his career has taken off like a rocket and he is properly seen as one of the premier jazz pianists of our time. He comes to us right after his usual fall two-week (!) gig at the Vanguard.

Perhaps an affinity for the American popular songbook is in his blood - he is the son of Broadway composer Moose Charlap and singer Sandy Stewart, who shows up from time to time at his gigs. Whatever the reason, he is the master of this genre and regularly pulls obscure but beautiful songs out of some magical hat. Besides Kern, Porter, Rogers, the Gershwins, and the rest, one also hears the great jazz composers: Ellington, Strayhorn, and Monk of course, but also Gillespie, Gigi Gryce, and, especially Mulligan. And there is almost always something you have never heard - and after hearing it, you wonder why not. For example, here is what Ben Ratliff had to say, in a review of an evening devoted to Jimmie Heath and Joe Wilder:

“Mr. Charlap got off the most concise - and breathtaking - few minutes of the evening, in his trio’s performance of Stephen Sondheim’s “Uptown, Downtown.” (No, I had never heard jazz musicians play that tune, either.)”

Ben Ratliff, NYT, June 19, 2003

Mr. Charlap sustains duo and trio contexts beautifully, giving lots of room to his collaborators. It’s not easy to be at the front and an accompanist at the same time, but he can do it. You might listen to his duo CDs with Warren Vache (cornet/flugelhorn) or Jon Gordon (alto/soprano saxophone). I prefer the work with Gordon because I think so highly of this young altoist, but the last two tracks on the Vache CD, “Prelude to a Kiss” and “St. Louis Blues,” are nothing short of brilliant. One of the things I love about jazz is that it is a music that takes account of its history, and one in which historical comments can be made in real time. The technique is the quote, and quotes can be humorous, sad, or just comments that the other musicians may want to pick up on, making their own musical remarks in return. In the Ellington piece, Bill quotes early on from Monk’s introduction to “Round Midnight.” One can’t tell at the start of the quote whether Charlap is repeating the melody or going elsewhere. There is a wonderful “aha!” when you recognize that what you suspected was to be another take on the melody is in fact something else indeed. And to juxtapose Monk and Ellington is completely appropriate, a reminder of the affinity the works of those greatest of jazz composers have. In the W. C. Handy piece, he also quotes, this time from Charlie Parker’s “Parker’s Mood.” Parker’s Mood was one of the tunes set to lyrics by Clarence Beeks (aka King Pleasure), and the musical phrase in question, goes, in Beeks’ words, “Come with me, if you want to go to Kansas City.” I don’t know if Charlap had the “two cities” combination in mind, or the notion that Charlie Parker was born in Kansas City, but I wouldn’t be surprised.

Mr. Charlap has appeared twice at *JazzNights*. Indeed, he was our very first artist, way back in 2002. This time he appears in an unusual setting, a duo performance with the great bassist - and long-time member of his working trio - Peter Washington. Mr. Washington is a superb artist, one whose presence acts as a magnet for me when I am deciding where to go on an evening. If he’s playing, I will try especially hard to make it, and I am always rewarded. He is a former *Jazz Messenger*, and a veteran of the great Tommy Flanagan trio (with Lewis Nash). I can imagine no better pedigree.

"Peter Washington? He be the Man!"

A. G. Zaire