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April 11, 109

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Cape fest serves up delicious shocks

MUSICIANS rarely plan to make history. Saxophonist Dave Liebman, one star of last weekend's Cape Town International Jazz Festival, says of working with the ground-breaking Miles Davis outfits of the early 1970s: "We weren't aware that what we were doing would be so important — we were just improvising as best we could."

In the same way, it's possible that neither curators nor players at the festival designed the event as the first in this country to fully showcase the shock of the new jazz. But that's what it was.

It played to full houses and was a delicious rather than a scary shock. It was set in a context replete with the usual high-quality but predictable mainstream music. But the sets that were most discussed all shared one characteristic: they made few concessions to commercialism and presented bracingly fresh sounds and approaches.

The surprises started with multi-instrumentalist Kyle Shepherd's wistful postmodernist collage of Cape sounds, from Khoi mouthbow, Abdullah Ibrahim and the bilal (call to prayer) to the cadence of Xhosa chants.

With a similar approach, but a wholly different set of references, US pianist Robert Glasper's group carried us back to African polyrhythms and forward to the stuttering grooves of hip-hop, calling in to pay respects to Herbie Hancock, Chick Corea and Radiohead along the way.

Carlo Mombelli's Prisoners of Strange picked up the theme, patchworking not only musical references but sonic textures around assured, inspired improvisation. And anyone deterred by the pedestrian Opera Meets Jazz title of the Sibongile Khumalo, Shannon Mowday and Mike del Ferro collaboration that closed the night made a grave error.

This was "opera" in the broadest sense (including, for example, Princess Magogo) and jazz at the most liberated — as Khumalo termed it, "getting away from the narrow prison of scatting into real improvisation". That was Friday.

Saturday affirmed another development: that Cape Town is finally transcending its fascination with American music to produce a generation of players as original as those who taught them; Robbie Jansen, Errol Dyers and Basil "Manenberg" Coetzee.

Young bassist Jonathan Rubain's open-air set showcased this new sound, as Shepherd had done the previous night.

"I learned from Robbie," Rubain told me, "to aim for a sound like nobody but yourself."

New does not need to mean newly composed. Drummer Al Foster and vocalist Dianne Reeves created on-stage surprises from material we thought we knew well. McCoy Mrubata's Special Friends group started not with their usual African grooves but with an opening sequence of three astonishingly fierce improvisations.

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And so back to Liebman, who closed the festival with a version of John Coltrane's India that left the whole hall open-mouthed.

"I once asked Miles whether the group really needed a saxophonist," he reminisced. "Miles said dryly: 'No, keep on playing — people like to see your fingers move.'" But last weekend Liebman, and those others, gave us far, far more than that.

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