

Izzy's International House of Jazz: Full Court Press

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Every year when Bev Aronovitch and I get together to make plans for the next Izzy Asper Jazz Performances series, it's an adventure. So many world-class musicians to consider, so many musical angles to explore, so many eager listeners to please...

This 2012-13 season starts with two knockout concerts. The September opener, "Celebrating Dizzy," brings together a perfect storm of virtuosic players doing justice to Dizzy Gillespie's musical intelligence.

Of all the trumpet players out there today, a few may have the chops to do justice to Dizzy Gillespie, but Marcus Printup also has the wit—he's a musical prankster. He's got clever commentary on the back end of a solo, he can instigate a rhythm section with his rhythmic juxtapositions, and he's always up for a showdown with any of the musicians on the bandstand. His nerve and stamina are balanced out by a surprisingly generous and supportive nature—like Dizzy, who was also known amongst musicians as a great teacher.

On the drums is Dafnis Prieto, the young Cuban sensation. Prieto represents the front edge of Afro-Cuban jazz drumming, and he's bringing a freshness and subtlety to those traditional rhythmic stylings that make everything sound new again. Dizzy's particular affinity with the Afro-Cuban sound—he's responsible for standards like "Manteca" and "Night in Tunisia"—make Prieto a perfect choice. He's inventive, astute, and ridiculously accomplished.

Ed Simon is at the keyboard. Originally from Venezuela, Simon can now safely be called the Ubiquitous Ed Simon—if you took just a cross-section of recordings from the 90s onward, he's played with everybody from Terence Blanchard to Dianne Reeves to all of the major Afro-Cuban leaders to many of the established bebop players. He has taken in the north, south, east, and west of jazz vocabulary, and assimilated all that into a sound that's distinctly his own.

Coming back from a guest faculty position at this year's Summer Jazz Camp is the senior and most venerable player of the mix, Gary Smulyan. I use the term "senior" loosely since he's about my age, but he's been around many of the blocks most of us are still dreaming about. He's a regular and repeated winner of audience and critics polls (big ones like *Downbeat*, for instance), and is a fixture in the Village Vanguard house band. If you heard him at the Jazz Camp Faculty concert at the WAG in August, you know why—Smulyan is as good as it gets.

I'm really excited about playing with this band, and I think it's exactly the way to showcase Dizzy Gillespie's particular genius. His ideas were very international—he was at the front edge of the movement to make a world music out of jazz. His songs are witty, melodic, sexy, spicy, emotional, poised. But even more importantly, they're designed to be opened up by the X Factor that can happen when a bunch of creative players are meeting for the first time. This concert is gonna be alive with jam session chemistry, and the potential for creative invention is going to be really high. It's a shame it's not a record date...

The second concert, in mid-October, features one of the most influential musicians of the last 25 years. I'm talking about bassist Christian McBride. I see him as the successor to Ray Brown, and easily the most important bass player on the scene today. Here's a person with perfect pitch and its rhythmic equivalent, a photographic memory, and an endless pool of talent. If he'd focused on piano, he'd be another Art Tatum; if he'd chosen drums, another Max Roach. A musician like Christian McBride comes along every fifty years or so. He would have stood shoulder with any of the greats in the 40s and 50s, and not a lot of modern players can say that.

He's returning to the Berney Theatre to do what he was born to do: flesh out the beauty of standards, and create melodic invention. He's an expert with the bow, so we'll get to hear a range of voicings from his bass. He's a gregarious, warm, intelligent person, and it all comes out in his music.

He's coming with his Inside Straight Quintet, and the whole stage is going to be electric. Winnipeggers will be happy to welcome back saxophonist Steve Wilson—I think of him as the Ella Fitzgerald of the alto sax. His sound is thick and colourful, and he's gonna tell you a very personal musical story that will stay with you for a long time.

Peter Martin is at the piano. He's one of those accomplished, industrious players with a strong grounding in the tradition. He can move effortlessly from bebop and swing and stride to more contemporary idioms, and always sound like himself.

Drummer Carl Allen is a fixture in the New York scene, with more than 200 recording credits. Allen is a busy performer and bandleader, and has his own production company. He's also an educator, serving on the jazz faculty at Juilliard for the last dozen years.

The new kid on the block is Warren Wolf. A multi-instrumentalist, with performing chops on piano, drums, bass, vibes, and marimba, he'll be at the vibraphone for this concert. McBride is a big fan. He points out that Wolf is a great fit for his project of exploring the jazz tradition because he "has the duality to create this fresh new language but still keep it in the pocket, keep it rooted."

I think of Izzy and Babs as we head into another year of celebrating the rich heritage and continuing currency of jazz in this city. What a great example they set in knowing this music can pull people together, and what a great gift they continue to share with us all. See you at the Berney!

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