*JazzNights (65)*

I love duos. Such “without a net” performances have the transparency of solo work plus the chance to hear clearly the musicians thinking together. *JazzNights* has a long history of presenting duos, some of them featuring quite unusual groupings – two basses, piano/soprano saxophone, for example. More are coming over the next couple of years. On the very first *JazzNight*, September 2002, we presented a duo, pianist Bill Charlap and bassist Sean Smith. Now, over 12 years later, we are fortunate to have Sean Smith back in another duo setting, with another great pianist, Bruce Barth.

Sean Smith is appropriately described as an “elegant” bassist. What’s “elegance” in music? I’d say it is a combination of imagination and taste, with perhaps a touch of eloquence thrown in. Where does it come from? Well, it is probably mainly lodged somewhere inscrutably deep in his DNA, but we can try to find other sources - or maybe expressions of this “elegance.” I suspect that at least some of it comes from having played with so many excellent vocalists, among them Peggy Lee, Carol Sloan, Suzannah McCorkle, Maureen McGovern, and Mark Murphy - quite a list! That kind of experience seems to make for thoughtful playing and to translate somehow into outstanding bandleading. Tommy Flanagan played for years with Ella Fitzgerald, for example, and legions of today's best pianists and bassists graduated from "Betty Carter University," the Jazz equivalent of Harvard. Somehow, the requirement for effective accompaniment - being solid and forceful, but being prominent only when required, translate into strong, but sensitive playing in other contexts.

Of course, Sean has also played in a multitude of important groups - he was the bassist in the Jacky Terrasson trio for some time, for example. I heard versions of that trio (Terrasson, Smith, and several different drummers) many times in 2002-2003, and my notes often have Smith stealing the show.

Smith spends much of his efforts on composition, and we are likely to hear some of his tunes in January. It’s a mark of Smith’s compositional skill that he sustains this effort so well, and that his tunes are used often by other musicians. In a recent interview with Janet Sommer, in All About Jazz: (for the full interview, see: http://www.allaboutjazz.com/articles/eyee0500.htm).

Sommer: “If you had to make a distinction, would you consider yourself more a composer, or more a bassist?”

Smith: “ ....I don’t have one thing out of those two that is stronger. They’re both equal, they’re both a very important part of me, and they rear their heads at different times, there is a time and place for both of them. They cross paths a lot, probably more than I consciously know. But, I’m a musician. And yes, a jazz musician, but a musician.”

Smith clearly has trouble making the distinction between composition and playing - and I think that’s just great! In the Sommer interview Smith talked further about composing: “...I’ve done quite a bit of writing, mostly because I’ve wanted to, and because I was called to do it, you could say. I enjoy the creative process, even if the tune that I’ve ended up with isn’t some kind of great tune, I’ve learned something during that time, I’ve completed something in that time, and I was also able to enjoy that creative process that we were talking about.” You could write those same wise words about any creative endeavor - chemistry, perhaps.

One of my very favorite pianists, [Bruce Barth](http://www.brucebarth.com/) is a reformed Californian, who started his study of (classical) piano at the age of five. An early move to New York introduced him to jazz. He studied at the New England Conservatory with the great pianists Jacki Bayard and Fred Hersch. He's played with many wonderful groups, notably Nat Adderley, Terrence Blanchard, and the Mingus Big Band, and made his early recordings with George Russell, among the most forward-looking of all jazz composers (Cubana Be, Cubana Bop, for example, just unbelievable for its time). If you saw Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" you saw and heard Mr. Barth. He's been back in New York since 1988, and active there and all over the world in solo, trio, and small group settings. He plays in all the best places, The Village Vanguard, The Kennedy Center, The Jazz Standard.... on and on.

**"Pianist Barth digs deep to his true soul in the keyboard language....self-assured and full of ideas."**

**Downbeat**

 The instrumental company he keeps these days is also impressive. For example, the brilliant alto and soprano saxophonist, Steve Wilson is a frequent collaborator, as is Terell Stafford, one of today’s very best triumpet/flugelhorn virtuosos. On his own, Barth is invariably thoughtful, inventive, lyrical, and always swinging like mad. A recent CD, "Live at the Village Vanguard" is as good an example of the piano trio at work as you will hear - it is just superb. His duo recording with Steve Wilson – and its reprieve at the Princeton Festival of 2012 is just sensational. We can all hear him and Sean live and now, in the moment, January 11th. We hope to see you there.

**"Bruce is a great musician, a force to be reckoned with. He can be very percussive and energetic or play with the subtleties of a Hank Jones or Herbie Hancock."**

**Terence Blanchard**