*JazzNights (85)*

Our leader this December, drummer Johnathan Blake, comes by his prodigious chops naturally – he is the son of renowned jazz violinist John Blake, Jr. In fact his professional debut came at the age of 6 playing a duet with his father on Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood. The drums beckoned however, and eventually took over. He is the intellectual heir to a long line of brilliant Philadelphia drummers – Philly Joe Jones, and Mickey Roker among them. “The “Philadelphia drum sound” has been described as “the vertiginous sensation of being both slightly behind the beat and hurtling into the next measure.” (Aiden Levy, Jazz Times). Leaving aside the vexing question of what this description means, exactly, one can hear both relaxation and compelling, swinging intensity in Mr. Blake’s playing.

He is a graduate of the jazz program at William Paterson University and the Rutgers program specializing in composition. In 2006 he was awarded an ASCAP Young Jazz Composers Award. He us a regular member of Kenny Barron’s trio, and Joe Locke’s “Force of Four.” Both the Mingus Big Band and Maria Schneider’s Orchestra have benefited from Mr. Blake’s playing. My notes on Ms Schneider’s award-winning ensemble last Thanksgiving week at the Jazz Standard remark his effect on the band:

“The MSO is great tonight – JB is moving it!”

And the next nights, at other clubs, one “regular” after another spoke to me of Mr. Blake’s influence on that orchestra. There was remarkable unanimity, not to mention great enthusiasm. This November 24 and 25 he is at the Jazz Gallery as the recipient of their Fellowship Commission and will present “My Life Matters.” Worth a visit!

Finally, I have to add that Mr. Blake’s most frequent collaborators, people like Mark Turner, Robert Glasper, and Jaleel Shaw, are among the musicians I most admire. I am not quite sure what that means, but for me, anyway, it is a good sign!

“Your job is not to be just a timekeeper. It’s about giving that extra energy to the musicians. And they rely on that. So if you’re sluggish, the band is going to sound sluggish. If you’re powerful and you give them the energy, the band is going to be full of energy.”

Johnathan Blake

Dayna Stephens was the #2 Risiing Star in the 2017 Downbeat poll. He graduated from the Berklee College of Music, and, later, from the Thelonious Monk Institute where he studied with Wayne Shorter, among others. His recovery from a rare kidney disease (though a kidney donation from his aunt) led to the possibility of playing all over the world, and to his most recent CD, Gratitude.

“This album [Gratitude], showcases some of today’s finest musicians at the height of their craft, anchored by Stephens’ humble magnetism. The musicians exude a patient, persistent quality in their collective exploration, with the melodies unfolding into searching improvisations throughout.”

Alex W. Rodriguez

“…there is a young Cuban pianist named David Virelles, whom I consider a genius.”

**Chucho Valdés**

**With an introduction like that, what more is there to say? The young Mr. Virelles has already made his mark. He is the first recipient of the Oscar Peterson Award, and his recent CDs are on “everyone’s” Best of the Year lists Mboko [ 2014], Antenna [ 2016, five stars from Downbeat].**

**Bassist Dezron Douglas is a protégé of the late, great alto saxophonist Jackie MacLean. While at Hartford’s Hartt School of Music he co-founded The New Jazz Workshop of Hartford. This young lion of the bass has worked with Cyrus Chestnut’s trio, and many other groups.**

**In summary, this next December 9 we present an outstanding quartet of today’s most exciting musicians – definitely worth a visit!**

**Johnathan Blake’s CDs as a Leader**

CD 2012. The Eleventh Hour, Sunnyside Communications 1304

CD 2014. Gone, but not Forgotten, Criss Cross Jazz 1368