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1296 words 1 photo
Final Rev. copy 11-01-09
http://www.swingvotemag.com/Magazine/sidebar/svi_Jude_DeLorca.php/

DAZZLED BY 8

Smothered inside by Mile High's early winter snowstorm, hands cupping steaming coffee, staring out at hardy citizens plying the art of snow shoveling - their deft hands, focused attention and fluid body movements brought me back to a night not too long ago where the light summer breeze night was seduced by the soft echo of jazz drifting out of the doors of Dazzle and another set of hands in concert with focused body movement.

This eternal summer June evening this fan was anticipating a great show in the main room as Dazzle, heralded by *Downbeat Magazine* as one of the world's best jazz clubs, showcased eight year-old Aleks Girshevich, virtuoso drummer.

What I was not prepared for was an exceptional experience, not only in performance and performers, but also in human nature. One of those evenings you will talk about years from now sitting in a sailboat, standing on a mountain, drinking at a wedding reception, basking in the birth of new life or after the funeral of a friend ... when you speak of singular moments that carried your soul away to another land far far away and you are aware you were lucky to be alive at that moment in time. It cannot be repeated as you see raw talent and born genius for the first time.

Rostropovich said of du Pré, "...the cello was an organic part of her nature ... born with a cello in her hands ..." ¹ so it is with Uzbekistan-born Aleks, playing since five years old, the sticks are extensions of his arms, hands, fingers; his drum kit the natural womb from which he creates seemingly effortlessly cool, poised, sure rhythm.

Joined in his debut gig by his fine keyboardist father, Vlad Girshevich, Laura Newman, vibrant saxophonist and owner of downtown Denver's Herb's Jazz & Blues, and soulful trumpeter, Gabriel Mervine, Aleks was in high spirits. Interviewing him prior to his performance, I asked him if he was nervous, he looked at me as if that were really a stupid question. He told me he had spent four hours practicing and he was most excited because "Tonight I pay everyone

¹ In an interview with Elizabeth Wilson for the BBC Music Magazine's 60th birthday tribute to Jacqueline du Pré, January 2005. CD notes TESTAMENT ©Elizabeth Wilson, 2005.

... me!" Off he raced with his toddler cousin who was with the huge gathering of family and friends. Catching him a few minutes later as he needed to button up his formal vest and check his long-sleeved white shirt cuffs and tie, he said his favorite musicians, besides his father and fellow musicians of the evening, are Keith Jarrett, Jack deJohnette, Chick Corea, Vinnie Kolauta, Steve Gadd ... and rattling off a couple of other names as he decided to duck under the table to find his cousin and run around some more.

Sprinkled in the room were several recognizable heavy-duty local musicians who knew what the rest of us were about to experience. Ellyn Rucker, accomplished pianist and long considered one of Denver's finest jazz and blues singers, seasoned drummer Alex Mateo, and Alex Nekrasov, who was to be a surprise guest saxophonist at end of set.

The lights dimmed, the musicians took the stage and all eight years of the boy Aleks compacted into a focused, poised, serious drummer with a buzz cut and clear eyes.

Seated behind the toms, cymbals and drums, sticks gripped confidently – Aleks began to follow Newman's purely fine lead. The little boy that had 15 minutes before raced around the room, squirmed on the chair and breathlessly answered questions – was transported into his world of music, where every fiber of his being was enveloped with the rhythm and hearing what his father, Vlad, Newman and Gabriel needed from him.

So diminutive this drummer that half the room could not see him behind his cymbals - I had to move to the extreme side in order to watch him completely where Rucker had already positioned herself and kindly provided essential commentary to understand what I was hearing, "for a drummer the ballad takes the most discipline ..." as Aleks strokes confidently to "I Fall In Love Too Easily".

Newman, Vlad, Gabriel, each offered up their most sophisticated talent challenging the young drummer who met each with perfect stroke and heart. Reminded me what our local jazz pianist Joe Bonner said about making an instrument sound like a voice, "I learned more about that from some of the drummers I worked with, the line of dynamics and the different kind of pitch they got from their sets"² I understood what he meant held captive now by this small boy who began playing by ear at five, with a huge talent and understanding for his instrument, taught by his classically trained pianist father, Vlad, not a drummer; a legacy of musical genius is a true gift to Aleks.

Beaming off to Aleks's side, center stage, Vlad Girshevich, a graduate of the Uspensky School of Music, one of the paramount music academies in the former Soviet Union, and after emigrating to the U.S., of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, effortlessly leads the set. Aleks returns in a clear and focused manner –

² Joe Bonner 1979, CD notes SUITES FOR CHOCOLATE, Jørgen Frigård, January 1986

serious - as if everything in life has come down to this minute, this gig, this composition ... and it has. Rostropovich got it right – organic – the sticks are part of his body.

With more “cool” in his pinky, than most adults, gone is the child, the playful, antsy boy – in place we hear, we see the smooth stroke right on the stick bead on the ride, the lift of the tiny shoulder and arm in one swift fluid body movement – nothing overly dramatic, or staged – you feel and hear it all comes from down deep.

Outside the steamed-up window, I hear the clean, strong “schlurff – schlurff” of the coconut fiber bristled snow broom on the pavement and I am back at Rucker’s side and hearing Aleks’s soft rake across the ride of the cymbal, “schwum – schwum.”

A special break from the set when Alex Mateo, a well-known drummer, who had met Aleks a year ago in Arvada, presents Aleks with Mateo’s own Yamaha Birch custom absolute he’s playing on – it is Aleks’s first complete set. A fine paternal tribute steeped in respect from one musician to another.

The last set is a powerful call and response between Newman and guest soprano saxophonist, the expressive Nekrasov that Aleks punctuates, very low-key.

The hour and a half is like a swift intake of breath – and we’ve been suspended.

The room breaks into wild applause complete with standing ovation, and back to that part about human nature, the unbridled pleasure and generous recognition of having been witness to this night coats the room with true “feel good.” Aleks’s lovely mother, Olga, hands him his stuffed dog, Jesse, which he grabs and holds as nonchalantly as his sticks. Suddenly, the little boy was back.

Talking to him immediately after the set, I asked if he were tired, he answered “No, I’ve got another gig at Mead.”

Newman just shakes her head and states “old soul” and tells me later, with admiration, after a complicated set, “the horn players disappear” as Aleks unselfconsciously takes the stage.

Catching comments as we step back into the Denver night, Ray, from Boulder, believes Aleks “channels”, “he’s from another time, another place.”

Half hour later at Mead Street Station, found Aleks behind the drums generously relinquished for a bit by Newman’s Jazz Trio’s own very cool drummer, Jill Fredricksen, who simply says, “he’s born with it” as an obvious truth. Rucker

takes up the mike, owns it and sings like no one else along with the little drummer who drums like no one else.

The waning quarter moon smiles on the night - truly we all were dazzled by the experience. It still warms me and speaks of timelessness.

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