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MUSIC REVIEW

An Intense Homage To Coltrane

By **CHUCK OBUCHOWSKI**
Special to The Courant
July 21, 2009

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HARTFORD - — The livin' was easy in **Bushnell Park** Sunday as the Greater Hartford Festival of Jazz wound down with lots of funky grooves and laid back covers of old pop hits. Frisbees sailed past food vendors as thousands enjoyed free music and camaraderie under glorious blue skies.

Somewhere between "Moondance" and "Sweetest Taboo," the volcanic force of a **John Coltrane** composition exploded into the summer air, rendering everything else insignificant. Many in the audience were unprepared for the intensity of this reverent Coltrane homage, performed by Azar Lawrence's quartet.

The 55-year-old saxophonist assembled a formidable quartet for this concert, anchored by the impassioned drumming of Billy Hart. Hartfordite Nat Reeves played bass, and Benito Gonzalez was on piano. As a young man, Lawrence apprenticed with Coltrane's favorite pianist, McCoy Tyner; Lawrence demonstrated Sunday how well he's learned to apply Coltrane's advanced techniques to his own improvisational directions. Lawrence had all but disappeared from the jazz scene for decades; his recent re-emergence finds him in outstanding musical form.

After beginning with inspired takes on "Afro Blue" and "Lonnie's Lament," the quartet attempted something truly audacious. Without a word of introduction, Lawrence launched into the tenor saxophone incantation of "Acknowledgment" from Coltrane's beloved "A Love Supreme" suite. The quartet dove into the intricacies of this 1964 musical milestone over the next 40 minutes, complete with solo bass and drum transitions. Lawrence maintained the four-part structure of the original, while allowing for ample new creation from each of his band members throughout.

Those who listened carefully were rewarded with an unforgettable sonic experience. Lawrence closed his set with a swirling soprano sojourn through one of Coltrane's favorite vehicles for extended improvisation: Rodgers & Hammerstein's "My Favorite Things."

Vocalist Cynthia Holiday also delivered a version of "My Favorite Things," but hers gave a sultry, soulful twist to the "Sound of Music" classic. The **New Jersey** native christened the main pavilion Sunday afternoon after several locally based ensembles had

warmed up the crowd with music on the smaller Friends of the Festival stage.

She may have been unfamiliar to the audience, but Holiday quickly won over the crowd with her blues-soaked swing and charming banter. Her repertoire was diverse, ranging from solid R&B fare such as "What You Won't Do for Love" to the simmering gospel groove of "Walk With Me Lord."

Holiday's backup band, led by Hammond B3 organist Radam Schwartz, provided just the right balance of looseness and precision. Julius Tolentino's alto and tenor saxophone solos were especially noteworthy. Tolentino is no stranger to Hartford, having graduated from the **Hart School** of Music at The **University of Hartford** in

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1997.

Keyboardist Bobby Lyle brought the festival to a close with a set of crowd-pleasing tunes that borrowed liberally from pop music. Despite the occasional foray into acoustic mainstream jazz ("Blues for **Dexter Gordon**"), the Houston-based piano man seemed more at home in the realms of funk and R&B.

When it worked — as on "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy," the quartet's sweaty encore — the pop marriage proved exciting. More often, jazz seemed reduced to a footnote, as on a sing-a-long version of "Minute by Minute," the old Doobie Brothers hit. It was hard to believe that one of jazz music's most celebrated works, "A Love Supreme," was ringing out from the same stage an hour earlier.

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