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JAZZ REVIEW

Live: Azar Lawrence

Out of hibernation and back in the spotlight

By Don Heckman, Special to The Times
 January 28, 2008

Saxophonist Azar Lawrence stepped onstage at Charlie O's on Friday night like a bear coming out of hibernation. Looking around warily, taking a few moments to adjust a recalcitrant reed on one of his horns, he dug into his first tune with blinking uncertainty.

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But by the time he reached his second tune, the old Jerome Kern classic "Yesterdays," Lawrence was fully into the light, fully ready to open up the searing improvisations that are the hallmark of his style. And there was more to come.

At its best, it was a stunning display of inventiveness from an artist who is among the far too under-heard players on the scene, despite having played with Elvin Jones, Miles Davis and McCoy Tyner in the 1970s.

Lawrence's most recent recording was a tribute to John Coltrane, and his influence was ever present. But the key factor was what he did with that influence: Rather than simulate essential Coltrane elements, Lawrence used them as both fuel and inspiration.

Whipping through fast-fingered arpeggiated runs, soaring into the tenor saxophone's high harmonics, occasionally dipping into multi-phonics, he played a series of solos that grew in intensity as the evening progressed.

His stunning blues playing reached into the gospel roots of the familiar form.

His re-imagining of such standards as "Out of This World," "On Green Dolphin Street" and "Nancy (With the Laughing Face)" (an offbeat Coltrane favorite) transformed the familiar melodies into emotional roller coasters.

Lawrence was well aided by Nate Morgan's piano playing, a moving amalgam resonating with traces of Thelonious Monk and Tyner, enlivened by his own stirring imagination. Bassist Chris Conner added sturdy ensemble support, combined with extraordinarily facile soloing. And Roy McCurdy, as always, was a drummer for all seasons, sensitively tailoring layers of percussion sounds to adapt to the evening's far-ranging material.

Why has such a world-class jazz saxophonist been relatively under the radar in recent years? Perhaps in part it's because Lawrence spent much of the '80s producing and playing with pop acts, such as Earth, Wind & Fire and Marvin Gaye, then took a long hiatus from the music world. Whatever the reason, it's good to hear him, good to

have talent of this caliber out of hibernation and back in action.

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