

The Year in Gigs



As always, it was a year of departures and arrivals. We marked a few centennials, mourned our many losses and tended to our own. The majors stopped pretending and finally gave up on their jazz divisions, except where catalog and crooners were concerned. On that front, Nellie McKay and Jamie Cullum made splashy jazzlike debuts, Diana Krall toughened up in black leather and the unstoppable Norah Jones moved another few million units without furrowing her brow. Trumping all was Wynton Marsalis, who erased all memory of *The Magic Hour*, his wan Blue Note debut,

by presiding over Jazz at Lincoln Center's expensive new HQ.

Yet even with all the business developments and CD releases, it's the live performances that spring most vividly to my mind. I caught my fair share of shows in 2004—somewhere between 200 and 300, if memory and my Day Runner can be trusted—and have the luxury of letting those evenings serve, in the aggregate, as my own impressionistic year in review. (It's not for nothing that I call this column "The Gig.")

Here's a chronological rundown of performances that stand out even through the fog of recollection. Avowedly incomprehensible and unabashedly subjective, it's a record of those moments when the air in the room electrified, and the music had me shaking my head (or scratching it) long after the sounds had dissolved into the past tense.

Fly, Village Vanguard, Feb. 13. Near the end of their weeklong Vanguard debut, saxophonist Mark Turner, drummer Jeff Ballard and bassist Larry Grenadier delivered a set as earthy as it was elastic. More so than even on their fine, self-titled Savoy debut, the trio fulfilled its promise of equilateral push and pull.

Maria Schneider Orchestra, Hunter College, Feb. 19. Stage-testing the material that would comprise her sublime *Concert in the Garden* (ArtistShare), Schneider and company were pliable, ethereal and cathartic. If there's a better big band on the planet, it's keeping quiet.

Bill Charlap Trio, Village Vanguard, April 6. I knew I liked *Somewhere* (Blue Note), his crisp Leonard Bernstein homage. But I wasn't prepared for how the stuff would take flight in performance, with the Washingtons (bassist Peter and drummer Kenny) keeping efficient, ebullient time. Charlap's "Cool" was bright and many-cornered, his "Some Other Time" achingly pensive.

Wayne Shorter Quartet, Bovard Auditorium, April 16. Bassist John Patitucci, pianist Danilo Pérez and drummer Brian Blade started this concert at the University of Southern California with a shimmering scrim of abstraction, into which Shorter's tenor entered like a toe in a reflecting pool. The ensuing hour found the band at its fiercest and most telepathically advanced—and Shorter in rare form, playing more tenor saxophone than I've heard in sev-

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eral other recent concerts combined. Michelle Mercer's taut and engrossing biography *Footprints: The Life and Music of Wayne Shorter* (Tarcher) will surely keep Shorter in the spotlight in 2005; I can only hope for another night like this one.

Bill Frisell Trio, Jazz Standard, April 30. The aforementioned Blade was one-third of this ensemble, along with organist Sam Yahel. Spooky and spacious at times, the two sets I saw also traversed a terrain more jagged and roughhewn than Frisell's usual path. It's still unclear whether this was the beginning of something or just a one-off; in either case, I won't soon forget the incendiary rendition of Bob Dylan's "Masters of War" that literally had my mouth agape.

Henry Grimes Trio, the Center, May 26. The venerable bassist provided a Vision Festival highlight with this unbroken hour-long improvisation featuring pianist Marilyn Crispell and drummer Andrew Cyrille. The explorers charged through dense thickets of notes—when they weren't soaring in the stratosphere.

Paul Motian, Joe Lovano, Bill Frisell, Village Vanguard, Sept. 1. Transcendence is almost a foregone conclusion with this threesome, which delivered an introspective, ceaselessly creative set. Frisell and Lovano drifted weightlessly in and out of the spotlight, and Motian was his inimitable, inscrutable self. (The trio has a new CD, *I Have the Room Above Her*, on ECM in February.)

Don Byron's Ivey-Divey Trio, Symphony Space, Oct. 8. Even with Billy Hart sitting in for Jack DeJohnette, Byron's bass-less band achieved the crackling intensity hinted at on its stellar Blue Note release. Byron's clarinets were vivid and voluptuous, and Jason Moran attacked the piano with emphatic fire.

Liberation Music Orchestra, Village Vanguard, Nov. 1. Coming on the eve of the election and the heels of a European festival tour, Charlie Haden's unruly agitators sounded, in fact, like a precision-calibrated machine. Their one-night stand was a marvel of terse lyricism and tense restraint, avant-garde in temperament rather than tone. And thanks to pianist-cofounder Carla Bley, they ended with both a bang and a whimper: Samuel Barber's elegiac "Adagio for Strings."

Jason Moran's Bandwagon, Merkin Concert Hall, Nov. 10. With the vital addition of guitarist Marvin Sewell, Moran's crew rollicked and roared, clearly savoring their bluesy ruckus. As I've come to expect with Moran, I turned this music over in my head for weeks afterwards, finding new wrinkles in its fabric. I risk nothing by making this prediction: *Same Mother*, Moran's new Blue Note album, will figure prominently in the next year in review. **JT**