

Gig Review

Joe Lovano Nonet
16th February 2007
Barbican

The concert began with a beautiful set of flowing duets between pianist Fred Hersch and 84-year-old harmonica legend Toots Thielmans. Toots is a man at ease, someone who, after living within its spaces for so long, treats music as a way of being, as natural as breathing or smiling: a cool impression of Thielmans' playful spirit. It felt effortless, and endlessly inviting, provided one could overcome the less than crystalline tone of his instrument (reminiscent for me, of the stark honesty in Billie Holiday's voice). The interplay between Thielmans and Hersch evoked an inspiring friendship.

The main attraction began with a programme dominated by Gunther Schuller's suite of tracks from Miles Davis' *Birth of the Cool*, Lovano's nonet configuration evidently inspired by the band that played on those seminal recordings, the wellspring of that once visionary notion of the third stream – a distinctive channelling of the waters of jazz and classical into something new.

The third stream as a concept came and went. Jazz moved itself uptown, from the clubs of 52nd street to the Lincoln Centre, and from Soho basements to the Barbican. Money and education and social respectability changed what a jazz audience expected to hear, in a slow evolution that engulfed many streams at once. Joe Lovano's music represents not the cutting edge now, but the modern mainstream in its weightiest flow.

Lovano himself may be the mainstream's most strident champion. His band look respectable, wear suits, take their music seriously, and unlike Wynton Marsalis, balance their outlook well between tradition and innovation. Lovano's playing itself, worthy of many more words than I can supply here, is exemplary – powerful, bullish and beautiful. Alongside him, worthy of special mention, subbing on tenor, was Englishman, Tim Garland. When he eventually got to showcase his own playing (to the crowd's relief and pleasure) he proved himself to be a fine match; if Lovano was bullish then Garland is perhaps best called stag-like: graceful and technically flawless.

The other members of Lovano's New York based band were equally impressive. Indeed it would be a challenge to put together a band of such quality from the very finest players on the London scene. Special note should also be made of veteran Hank Jones' broad, landscaped work on the piano.

This first thrust of the concert stretched the possibilities of its restrained cool-jazz moods, without violating them. The rhythm section, who perhaps as a result, had been too polite for some tastes in the first half, eventually had a chance to shine, firstly on a vast expedition toward freedom where drums alone sustained the chaos through a cycle of solos that built upon one of the ensemble's most symphonic head arrangements, then on a pleasing if formulaic piece of hard-bop which closed the show, once again spotlighting each of the horn-players, in a setting which all could relish.

While the playing was not of a uniform standard – the lone trumpet player did little more than squawk his contributions and battle with his microphone – the overall effect was both well-balanced and invigorating.