

MUSIC REVIEW

Improvisation in Harlem, Corner of Hip-Hop and Jazz

By BEN RATLIFF
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One of the magnetic forces holding together a lot of New York's better jazz musicians right now is the hip-hop composer and producer J Dilla, who died in 2006. It has to do with the fascinatingly human lurch and pop of his sampled rhythm tracks, but something bigger, too: the improvisational curiosity he had about rhythm and sound. He's at the heart of the contention that hip-hop and jazz have internal points of contact, not just philosophical ones.

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Miguel Atwood-Ferguson

And this is one of the entryways for understanding Miguel Atwood-Ferguson, the young violinist, composer and arranger who led his own ensemble, full of great jazz musicians from two coasts, in a concert on Saturday night at Annunciation Park in Harlem. A work-for-hire violinist and string arranger, he has more recently started to become a kind of Wynton Marsalis or Gunther Schuller for the postsoul, semijazz, pacifist-hip-hop continuum: a leader of skilled ensembles, a celebrator of repertoires, an organizer of legacies.

Humble, respectful, a little mystical, he and his interests would appeal to ferocious record snobs but also to middle-aged urbanites who like their music calming and uplifting and conscious, in the hip-hop sense of the word. Is it relevant that Mr. Atwood-Ferguson is a Nichiren Buddhist, the

same sect that includes Wayne Shorter, Herbie Hancock, Buster Williams and Bennie Maupin? Somehow it seems so.

In any case he has become connected with organizations on the East and West Coasts that need someone exactly like him: in Los Angeles, the music and film production house Mochilla and the record label Brainfeeder; and in New York, the concert producer Revive Da Live, which organized Saturday's concert through Harlem Stage.

A few years ago with a full orchestra he reimagined some of J Dilla's music on a record called "Suite for Ma Dukes." On Saturday with a

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smaller ensemble — 12 musicians, including himself — he played Dilla twice: rare and interestingly slouchy tracks called “You’re My Lady” and “Miroslav Vitous,” on which the bassist Kenneth Rodgers wobbled his notes down a half-step, and Mr. Atwood-Ferguson double-timed his violin strokes to sound like a strobing, electronic-tremolo effect.

He linked together John Coltrane’s slow, simmery, tantric-breathing ballads “Peace on Earth” and “After the Rain” into one piece. There was a version of Joe Henderson’s “Afro-Centric” (from “Power to the People,” an underrated jazz album, liminal and mysteriously funky, very Atwood-Fergusonian). And there was also his own “[Magnolia](#),” perhaps the best three minutes of the evening, a quietly intense rubato ballad built of oozing long-tones and Brandee Younger’s harp arpeggios: it was where contemporary classical music ran into Dilla and ’70s film-soundtrack music.


The musicians found their way to this naturally, and they included the jazz drummer Jamire Williams, heroically making the beats weave and stagger; the 20-year-old Los Angeles pianist Austin Peralta, who hasn’t quite had his moment with East Coast jazz audiences but probably will soon; and three horn players who help keep New York’s jazz-club quality levels high: the saxophonist Marcus Strickland, the trombonist Corey King and the trumpeter Keyon Harrold.

Then there were the guest vocalists, needed to lend cred and get the uptown crowds out on the artificial turf, but not strictly necessary to the show. Or at least they took it in different directions. One was Pharoahe Monch, who was once part of the ’90s indie-rap school like Dilla; he performed “Still Standing,” a track with Jill Scott on his new record, helpfully dedicating it to anyone who has persevered through anything. Marie Daulne of Zap Mama sang a wicked version of Etta James’s “Damn Your Eyes,” Eartha Kitt-like in her imperious trebliness. And José James, an excellent young singer on the line between jazz and soul, and another musician who thrives on his respect for others, who sang “Winter in America” and “The Bottle,” songs by Gil Scott-Heron, who died in May. They were so close in sound and spirit to the original that they had little else to say.

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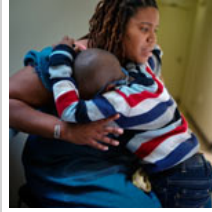
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