

A lovely way to spend an evening

By Carl Moore

IF YOU LISTEN TO THE EXPERTS---and I am not one---the music called jazz, just over 100 years old, has been on its death bed for some time now. Yet, it refuses to expire and allow the undertaker to step in. That must tell you something about its resilience and value.



The music received a welcome shot in the arm on the balmy evening of Thursday, January 14, at the Frank Collymore Hall, a venue associated with that genre since the late Barbadian pianist Adrian Clarke put a new nine-foot Steinway orchestral concert grand piano through its first paces back in September 1986.

Ebe Gilkes was the second jazz pianist to play the Steinway when he performed at the inaugural jazz session in "City Nights", just a week after the Hall opened.

Ebe was back at the Hall, along with Dr. Clarence Green (bass), Vere Gibson (drums), Andre Woodvine (saxes), Andre Forde (steel pan), and vocalists Paula Hinds, June Beckles and Peter Feldman, in a spectacular sunset concert and launch of Ebe's long-awaited first CD album.

The Frank Collymore Hall was full and overflowing with eager, appreciative jazz fans. (I overheard one who met Ebe in the gents' room showering him with compliments during ablutions ... and it was only intermission!)

Duke Ellington immortalised the simple concept that instantly became the jazz mantra and the music's *raison d'être*. The Duke stressed: "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing!" It's as simple as that---if it doesn't swing, call it something else.

After the opening pleasantries designed to allow the audience to settle in (**I want a little girl**, **My romance**, the heavenly **Estaté**---pronounced es-tah-tay---, Brubeck's **In your own sweet way** and **Where do we go from here?**) the programme swung right up to versatile Paula Hinds's marching off the stage as the saints went marching out.

Andre Woodvine, the undisputed master of the sax in Barbados, entered with his tenor horn on a be-boppish, up-tempo version of **The night has a thousand eyes**

and maintained that element of swing, with the exception of a few romantic ballads and a blues number along the way.

There were many highlights of the near three-hour concert: Woodvine's tenor and alto sax playing; an exciting young steel pannist, Andre Forde, who plays his instrument like a piano; Peter Feldman, a portly entertainer with the *joie de vivre* of a Mel Tormé; the sultry June Beckles and the lady of the evening, Paula Hinds; yes, *the* Paula Hinds of gospel fame, rendering **The way we were** and **When the saints go marching in**. Ms Hinds has a future in jazz ... if she wants one.

But back to the Ebe Gilkes Trio, the main reason why the Hall had standing room only and long before starting time at 6:15 p.m. Ebe plays with the elegance and empathy of Tommy Flanagan, as well as Ellis Larkins; I can't quite make up my mind. Then, there's the panache and inventiveness of his mentor Oscar Peterson.

But Mr. Gilkes is no copycat: his own style dominates with his playful lines, his naughty creativity, (as we heard, towards the end of **Estaté** when he made a sly allusion to Gershwin's **Summertime**); and his sudden change of tempo in the middle of the same tune, with the spontaneous collusion of his rhythm men, Green and Gibson.

Ebe Gilkes has been playing the piano since before making Barbados his home over 50 years ago. His performance was an object lesson in how to pace the proceedings, how not to lose touch with the rhythm section, how to support a singer without getting in the way, and how to build a solo (who can forget how he complemented Woodvine at the bridge on **Goodbye Mr. Evans?**).

Clarence Green was introduced as "a chiropractor by day and a musician by night". He is supple and subtle, obviously someone who has paid attention to Ray Brown's approach. His playing suggests that he does not see the bass as merely a rhythm instrument---just there for time-keeping purposes. He demonstrated on a few occasions that that instrument can carry the melody when called upon and he did it with delicate artistry, receiving applause from the large audience every time.

What can one say about the effervescent Vere Gibson, of pleasant "Vere and Vern (the late, beloved El Verno del Congo)" recall of the Sixties?

Jazz drumming to Vere Gibson---son of a musician who played the carpenter's saw---is like interior decorating: he was constantly on the look-out for spaces provided by the piano and filled them with orthodontic precision, finesse and delicacy. The ride and high-hat cymbals created a cool canvas for his artistry; his brush work was attractive, to the ear as well as the eye; and he used his right foot

to drop bombs with the bass drum, like Kenny Clarke, at carefully-timed intervals. He had great fun doing it, too!

Jazz drumming to him is not a work-out in the gym: he did not sweat.

Ebe Gilkes at 79 is still the master of melody, touch and harmonic sensitivity, and his technique is formidable.

The new CD is a must for collectors of good music. It's been long in coming. Too long, if you ask me. Ebe admits to being a procrastinator and he does so, in writing, in the liner notes of the CD, which was superbly recorded by Maxie Baldeo and produced by Russell Croney and Susan Bain. The recording was done in the brilliant acoustic environment of the Frank Collymore Hall.

I think I can be allowed a small criticism here. The William Cummins cover photo of the CD is perfect but a bit more thought could have gone into the title. Merely "Ebe Gilkes Trio" is flat and uninteresting. What about "Ebe ... At Last!", and the inclusion of that tune on the disc?

Thursday, January 14, 2010, was a memorable evening at the Frank Collymore Hall.

Just as I had started to despair that jazz in Barbados was headed toward the Museum---not for a concert---but as an artifact, Ebe Gilkes has restored hope. Only if the radio stations could spare a few minutes every day---there are 1,440 minutes in a day---to share a little jazz with listeners and to enrich and expand their musical menu.

Manager Fran Wickham and her staff at the Frank Collymore Hall should take the final bow for that presentation and be congratulated for continuing to offer such a consistently high level of programming, as has been the ethos of the Hall since its inception with Allyson Leacock.

To quote an Oscar Peterson favourite, it was **A lovely way to spend an evening.**

If Ms. Wickham had suddenly decided to charge an admission fee, retroactively, no one would have refused to pay up.

- *Carl Moore is a jazz lover and former presenter of "A Little Night Music", "Jazz Alive!" and "All That Jazz", on Barbadian radio stations since 1969.*
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