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Three Bands, Floating Their Music on a Cool Breeze

By Nate Chinen

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Saturday night's free concert at Central Park Summerstage amounted to three and a half hours of intelligent groove, informed by jazz but rarely beholden to it, with improvisation as a binding but nonidiomatic force. With three bands on the bill — Medeski Martin & Wood, Josh Roseman and the King Froopy All-Stars, and Jim Black's AlasNoAxis — there were innumerable on-the-fly decisions about timbre and color, rhythm and counter-rhythm. Each set was impressive in its own way, but there was continuity among them.

The show was jointly presented by Summerstage, the Blue Note Jazz Festival and the Undead Jazzfest. Of these three it seemed to belong most to the Undead Jazzfest, which doesn't technically begin until next week. Adam Schatz, one of that event's organizers, took the stage between sets to hype the bands and congratulate the audience for its good taste and hardy constitution. (A cool breeze and the threat of rain apparently prevented some would-be attendees from showing up. Then again, maybe they were at Bonnaroo.)

Members of all three bands on the bill spent overlapping stretches studying in Boston during the 1980s, either at the New England Conservatory or the Berklee College of Music. This was little more than subtext onstage, a matter of shared history and common experience.

Still, it meant something. Higher jazz education was a more rigid proposition 25 years ago, and each of these musicians sought out an alternative current to the swinging mainstream. Free jazz, funk and noise-rock were outré departures then, and to align oneself with any of them, never mind all of them, was a self-marginalizing act. That the situation is so different now can largely be attributed to this generation of players; consult present-day undergraduates at a jazz program and you're likely to draw that conclusion.

In New York, at least, you'll hear about Mr. Black, a galvanizing presence in avant-garde jazz and one of its most original drummers. As a sideman he has long been known for feverish disruption, lurching fast from one premise to the next. *AlasNoAxis*, which made its debut in 2000, established him as a bandleader-composer of calmer, more woozily immersive aims.

The band — with Mr. Black, Chris Speed and a pair of intuitive virtuosos from Iceland, the bassist Skuli Sverrisson and the guitarist Hilmar Jensson — played a transcendent first set on Saturday, hazy and purposeful and quite beautiful. The songs were often abstracted, but "Maybe" which closed the set, unfolded on deceptively simple terms: a quarter-note melody, played by Mr. Speed with sighing restraint, before an eventual onrush of distortion.

The King Froopy All-Stars, led by Mr. Roseman, a trombonist, is a newer group, and its identity hasn't yet been fully formed. But there was a lot of promise in the band's set, which operated from the ground up, with a sturdy rhythm section that often featured two drummers. One piece began with a faintly sambalike invocation before clamping down on a vamp in quintuple meter, over which the saxophonist Myron Walden constructed a soulful argument. The arrangements deftly took advantage of a big-band-like lineup, with phrases pinging around among the horns and reeds.

Medeski Martin & Wood played a more variegated and simply thrilling set than either of the openers, delivering not only derivations of New Orleans funk (suggesting both the Meters and Professor Longhair) but also variations on spaghetti-western soundtracks, Middle Eastern music, retro faux-reggae and texture-mad free jazz. John Medeski employed Hammond B-3 organ, analog synthesizers, melodica and acoustic piano; Chris Wood switched between electric and upright acoustic bass. Billy Martin occasionally stood up from his drum kit to play a hand-held frame drum or a gamelan. It all flowed.

This year Medeski Martin & Wood are celebrating their 20th anniversary, and their set included both recent material and a version of the first groove they came up with together. It wasn't always outwardly crowd pleasing; there were moments of transition and experimentation. This is a band that has earned the right to do whatever it wants and hasn't remotely run out of options.

The Blue Note Jazz Festival runs through June 30; bluenotejazzfestival.com. The Undead Jazzfest runs June 23 through 26; undeadjazz.com.