

Aaron Parks Trio - Saratoga Springs NY (2013)

Written by bluesever

Friday, 25 September 2015 15:49 -

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1. *Like Someone In Love* 2. *Isle Of Everything* 3. *Band Intro* 4. *Ecaroh* 5. *Unknown Title*
6. *UT* 7. *UT* 8. *Eleuthera* 9. *Comments* 10. *Untitled Tune* 11. *Cartoon Elements* Aaron
Parks - piano Ben Street - bass R.J. Miller – drums Skidmore College Zankel Music Center
Saratoga Springs, NY December 6, 2013

Aaron Parks didn't just look like a young college professor as he led his trio onstage at Zankel Music Center last Friday night (December 6). James Farm's piano man had actually been teaching master classes at Skidmore College the day before, so the "mentee" of Terence Blanchard was now the mentor. Just one more step in an ever winding, always interesting creative journey that started when Blanchard plucked a teenage Parks out of Manhattan School of Music and showed him the world. And, as we saw on this night, that journey is far from over.

Given the prodigious nature of Parks' compositional skills, having him start the night with a straight-down-the-middle take on Jimmy van Heusen's "Like Someone in Love" was a bit of a shock. It's true that Parks' early recordings touch on the Great American Songbook, but we've become so used to Parks doing his own thing that it's kind of weird to hear him doing anybody else's tunes. More to the point, Parks eschewed the young musician's urge to deconstruct an older piece, giving van Heusen's music the loving touch it deserved.

Parks went back to his own work after "Someone," spinning a swirling, aggressive piece called "Isle of Everything." (Say the title fast, and you'll get the joke.) That was one of the few titles Parks shared with us, as he seemed to be woodshedding new material for us. The one untitled piece he did introduce was a deep, dark blues that showed his ability to play inside and outside at the same time. But Parks wasn't done looking back, as he and his backers mixed music he wrote with music he didn't over a too-short 70 minute set that gave every player plenty of room to show his stuff. During an old Horace Silver tune, Parks simply sat back after the introductory

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section, put his hands on his thighs, and smiled with the rest of us while bassist Ben Street and drummer R.J. Miller took off on the piece.

Although Miller is something of an unknown quantity, Street's massive tone and sterling foundation-building abilities are well documented. But given that Parks was flying without a second "traditional" soloist, both players had to do a lot more heavy lifting than your average rhythm section on this evening, and both were more than up to the task. Street has the same kind of love (and ear for) a lyric as Parks, and told marvelous stories of his own that matched the mood of anything Parks played. What Miller shared with Parks was an unerring sense of control as he kept his kit's temperature just hot enough, relying on cymbals and rims to inject sizzle into the songs. Miller's only "big moment" was towards the end of the closer, "Cartoon Elements," but we'd discovered the size of his talent long before then.

Those of us who've watched Parks "grow up" have become used to soaring works like "Harvesting Dance," or "Coax" from James Farm's self-titled 2011 release. Whether it was the trio format or just Parks' own choice, this evening's vibe was – for lack of a better term – "restrained-plus." There were plenty of moments when the teenage-prodigy-made-VERY-good showed the muscle and intention that knocks our heads back. But Parks only brought out the hard stuff when it was called for, like in "Cartoon Elements" (which was more Venture Brothers than Warner Brothers in tone and attack); in contrast, "Like Someone in Love" felt more like Brubeck than Blanchard. It was a real departure from Parks' breakout release Invisible Cinema, but it was also a step away from Arborescence, the contemplative solo-piano disc he recently recorded for ECM.

The point is, Parks is confident enough and experienced enough that he doesn't have to let his freak flag fly for us to know he's on the job. His ability to give each piece just the right touch, just the right push, and just the right twist makes the mind bubble whether he's paging through the Great American Songbook or sending pages of his own out into the air. Long removed from Terence Blanchard's universe, Aaron Parks is his own man on every level – and even though he's got two decades of music behind him, it's patently obvious that he's just getting started.
---J.Hunter, nippertown.com

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