

A Hidden Jewel for Jazz Lovers in Revere

Roanna Forman

Camp, yes. Funky, too. But for great straight-ahead jazz, the Boston area's best kept secret is the Bob Gallo Quintet's Saturday afternoon jazz series at Club Caravan in Revere. Gallo, on tenor sax, shares the bandstand with Tony Lada (trombone), Marshall Wood (bass), Gene Roma (drums), and Ray Santisi (piano).

The musicians love this gig. What they prize most is the freedom to experiment, interact, and stretch themselves in a very relaxed, appreciative setting. "The Caravan is my favorite job of the week. When I practice, I practice for this gig." With jazz, Roma says, and with these players, "you have to work out things and make mistakes. If you're not making mistakes, you're not doing the right thing." Tony Lada also relishes the weekly musical workouts at these sessions. "We have a conversation up there, Bob and I, and with the rhythm section, too. It's not like I come on and do a solo. We're listening, and I'll pick up on different things Bob plays, or that the rhythm section does."

This is great ensemble playing-all quality, no bombast. Yet Gallo and Lada will really burn on call and response, as in "Comin' Home Baby," with Wood underpinning a funk feel with a stout, fat bass line. Lada's lines, with their incredible fluency and lyricism, always end somewhere unexpected and surprisingly right. His chops are not put out there for show-they support the intellectual sophistication of the phrases. And Gallo is a perfect complement to Lada's sound. His constant search for something new to say makes his solos interesting listening.

The rhythm section is tight and versatile as they come. Santisi, a supple pianist, is an effortless master of his keyboard with a lush harmonic sense. Pity the Caravan doesn't have an acoustic piano-that would enhance his sound. Roma's playing is crisp and he's listening hard to what's around him. Marshall Wood has an in-the-pocket, melodic sensibility, in the tradition of Oscar Pettiford.

The audience, unbelievably loyal, has followed this scene from venue to venue for a number of years, in some cases more than a decade. They know it mostly by word of mouth, and come from as far away as Nashua, New Hampshire.

Still, if it's ambience you're after, this club is redolent of the fifties and sixties, replete with that afternoon gloom, colored lights, and cardboard palm trees from the time when, as one listener said, "jazz was small places, dark places, smoky places." Gene Roma observed that "if Hollywood knew about this place, they wouldn't have to build a soundstage."

Each table and bar seat is marked with a number. These identifiers date from the Caravan's heyday as a "telephone club," when each seat had a phone, from which a hopeful gentleman could ring the lady of his choice and ask for a dance-a nice 'n' easy approach that made success more fun and rejection less obvious. Flooding from the blizzard of '78 destroyed the equipment, and the concept was abandoned.

Although this is essentially an instrumental gig, there is a weekly rotation of local singers. From seasoned talent to new faces, they each add something different to the mix: the R&B overtones and phrasing of Suzanne Perel; the sure understatement of Jim Porcella's ballads; the impeccable time of Steve Marvin; and the warmth, swing, and charm of Charlie Harris, to mention a few.

The Caravan is definitely an unexpected pleasure if you like jazz. Tenor player Paul Vignoli, who sat in one Saturday, tries to make it as often as possible. "The talent here is top talent. If somebody's not here and you get a substitute, it's still great. It's right in between two subway stops. But nobody knows about it."

They do now.

Jazz at the Caravan, every Saturday 3:00-7:00 p.m. \$5 cover charge. Located at 1380 North Shore Road in Revere, at Route 1A at Wonderland, within walking distance of Wonderland station on the MBTA Blue Line. Info: 781.284.9599.

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