

A Hearing of Shearing at the 92nd Street Y

By WILL FRIEDWALD | August 1, 2008



BY GEORGE, FOR GEORGE
Bill Charlap, Peter Bernstein, Sean Smith, Kenny Washington, and Joe Locke perform Wednesday in a tribute to George Shearing at the 92nd Street Y.

A few years back, at a Piano Jazz concert at the 92nd Street Y, Bill Charlap played a particularly strong solo, one which so obviously thrilled the gentleman sitting next to me that he responded with delighted laughter and a strong cry of “Yeah!”

It was then that I noticed his thick South London accent and closed eyes (he wasn’t wearing his trademark Ray-Bans) and realized I was one seat away from George Shearing, a living legend of the jazz piano if ever there was one. His lifelong blindness aside, Mr. Shearing is regarded as a musical visionary by generations of pianists including, as Mr. Charlap has pointed out, Bill Evans and Herbie Hancock. While Mr. Shearing opted at that moment to express his admiration for Mr. Charlap in a loud and

forthright manner, on Wednesday Mr. Charlap honored the ongoing legacy of what he called “the George Shearing Sound” in a formal concert that served as the climax of the second week of the Y’s Jazz in July series.

The obvious focal point for the show was the George Shearing Quintet, one of the most popular acts in the entire world of jazz for roughly three decades, beginning in 1949. The host alternated at the keyboard with Renee Rosnes (an exceptional pianist and, for the last 11 months, Mrs. Charlap), with the remaining roles being filled by the vibraphonist Joe Locke, the guitarist Peter Bernstein, the bassist Sean Smith, and the drummer Kenny Washington, with guests Danny Sadowick on Latin percussion and the vocalist Freddy Cole.

In a letter read by Mr. Charlap at the beginning of the show, the man of the hour, writing from his home in the Berkshires (he has not played in public in about five years), expressed his gratitude to the Y for re-creating the signature sound of his long-running quintet. He also acknowledged the assistance of the critic-producer-composer (and fellow Londoner) Leonard Feather in helping to create the “sound,” which they crafted by taking the block chord approach popularized by the Nat King Cole Trio and expanding it with the same notes repeated not only in the right and left hands of the piano, but by doubling, tripling, and quadrupling those notes with the guitar, vibraphone, and bass. In the letter, Mr. Shearing also gave Mr. Charlap a piece of advice that was new to all of us: Turn off the electricity on the vibraphone, he wrote, thus giving it a dry, xylophonic sound that better blends with the rest of the ensemble.

The result was a stunning experience — to hear a sound you know intimately from thousands of classic recordings but never thought you would encounter live — at least not since Mr. Shearing retired the quartet 30 years ago.

The opener, closer, and centerpiece of the concert was Mr. Shearing’s most essential jazz standard, “Lullaby of Birdland,” which was performed three ways: in its original incarnation as a

medium-bop number, then sung tenderly (with George David Weiss's well-known lyrics) as a genuine lullaby by Mr. Cole, and finally revved up to maximum speed as a fast mambo. In addition to one of the composer's prettier ballads, "Enchanted," which was written for an album with the guitarist Wes Montgomery in 1961, the group spotlighted the works of Mr. Shearing's great sidemen with the bassist Al McKibbin's blues number "Simplicity" and the drummer Denzil Best's polyrhythmic tune "Nothing but D. Best."

In 1949, the 30-year-old Mr. Shearing was one of the first high-profile leaders to employ a female instrumentalist, Marjorie Hyams, the original vibraphonist with the quintet. At the Y, Ms. Rosnes was a fitting choice as a second pianist, drawing attention to the classical aspects of Mr. Shearing's work in two unaccompanied solos: a surprisingly slow, impressionistic "Happy Days Are Here Again" and Kurt Weill's "My Ship," which was re-floated with wavelike washes of melody from Debussy's "Sunken Cathedral."

Ms. Rosnes then joined the re-formed quintet on two numbers intended to showcase Mr. Shearing's Latin side — "Stranger in Paradise" and "The Lamp Is Low," for which Daniel Sadownick provided a strong clave beat on congas. Coincidentally, these two tunes also spotlighted the composer's classical leanings, since the former is taken from a Russian opera by Borodin and the latter from a French pavanne by Ravel.

Ms. Rosnes also shone on a trio arrangement of "Conception." Prior to 1952, when Mr. Shearing introduced "Birdland," this Lennie Tristano-esque line had been his most famous original composition, recorded most famously by Miles Davis (under its original name and also thinly disguised but appropriately retitled as "Deception").

Mr. Cole, standing in for the many great singers who recorded with Mr. Shearing through the decades (including Teddi King, Peggy Lee, Nancy Wilson, and, most extensively, Mel Torme), opened the second half of the show with "Once in a While." He followed with two key numbers by his brother Nat — the ballad "I'm Lost," a classic 1961 encounter with the Shearing Quintet, and the innovative Cole-Shearing legato-staccato treatment of "Pick Yourself Up." This was the part of the evening that flew by the fastest; if Messrs. Cole and Charlap ever decide to recreate that brilliant album in its entirety, I will be first in line.

Mr. Charlap spoke glowingly of Mr. Shearing's harmonic genius. He could have also elaborated about his rhythmic brilliance, particularly on the Latin numbers, his amazing sense of dynamics, and his sensitivity as a vocal accompanist (not to mention his infamous penchant for puns, which, as he once said, has become "an old age penchant" ever since he turned 70).

Wednesday's concert did justice to nearly every aspect of the Shearing oeuvre, though I was disappointed that the producer omitted what is probably Mr. Shearing's biggest pop hit, "September in the Rain," as well as "Mambo Inn," which I've always regarded as the quintet's most amazing Cuban showpiece. Other than that, the only notable absence was the presence of all those busty starlets in tight dresses who were always lounging invitingly on Mr. Shearing's classic Capitol Records album covers.

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