



December 2, 2005

LESS IS MORE WITH ORGANISSIMO

By Howard Reich
Tribune arts critic

One way or another, every jazz organist must come to terms with the legacy of Jimmy Smith, who died in February at age 79 but remains the measure by which his successors are judged.

Some, such as the formidable Joey DeFrancesco, aspire to comparable levels of virtuosity and often attain it.

Others, such as Jim Alfredson, who anchors a Michigan-based trio called organissimo, build on Smith's breakthroughs in harmony and color while avoiding comparisons to the master's brilliant technique.

Alfredson and organissimo, in other words, draw an audience's attention with the vivid character of their compositions and the unerring precision of their ensemble playing, not the flash and bravura of the leader's keyboard work. Because Alfredson and his colleagues share a less-is-more musical philosophy, they can be remarkably effective as a unit, as was the case Wednesday night at HotHouse.

When Alfredson, guitarist Joe Gloss and drummer Randy Marsh are in top form, the listener nearly forgets that three distinct voices are at play.

As Alfredson pumps swelling chords, Marsh produces sharply staccato backbeats and Gloss articulates sleekly crafted melody lines. Even during solos, the musicians assist each other with uncommon sensitivity, a space in an Alfredson cadenza punctuated with a quick combination from Marsh's drum kit.

That's not to say, however, that Alfredson can't get around the keys of his Hammond B-3 organ. His right-hand work, in particular, offers ample fluidity, yet even his fast-flying passagework is more impressive for its melodic ingenuity than its speed or technical prowess.

Combine Alfredson's knack for choosing just the right color and tone in any given composition with his colleagues' ability to match his gestures, and you have one of the most promising organ trios in jazz.

Though an original tune such as "Stomp Yo' Feets" easily might have emerged as a caricature of New Orleans street beats, it transcended that cliché thanks to Marsh's ultra-economical rhythms and Alfredson's inventive solos. Drawing upon a broad vocabulary of keyboard devices—from two-handed glissandos to telegraphic chords to buoyant wah-wah effects—Alfredson proved as entertaining as the Crescent City musicians the tune saluted.

The band's best work came in "Mellow Mood," which Smith and Wes Montgomery famously recorded in the mid-1960s. Creating the darkest timbres, subtlest voicings and most insinuating phrases of the evening, organissimo lived up to the tune's name.

If the band was less creative in the standard "Tenderly," if drummer Marsh played harmonica to minimal effect, these moments were the exceptions in an otherwise beguiling show.

Copyright © 2005, The Chicago Tribune

MFA
Mitchell Feldman Associates

Publicity | Radio Promotion | Consulting
For The International Jazz Community

3432 Quivas Street #2
Denver, CO 80211 / USA
Phone: 303.433.0021
Cell: 303.641.4783

MitchellFeldmanAssociates@Comcast.net