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Stanley Crouch Would Have Cherished the Concert, at Least

An evening at Dizzy's celebrates the author, biographer, essayist, and occasional poet who died at 74 in 2020.



Tammy McCann during the celebration of Stanley Crouch at Dizzy's. Beth Naji



WILL FRIEDWALD

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A group of musicians, including one very talented singer, got together with writers, editors, and jazz fans early this week at Dizzy's to celebrate Stanley Crouch, the author, biographer, essayist, and occasional poet who died at 74 in 2020.

The event was several things at once: a memorial to a fallen comrade whose words and deeds shaped us all; a launch for his recently published posthumous collection of work, "[Victory Is Assured](#)," and a concert in his memory. Knowing Stanley, he would have merely endured the first two components while only really cherishing the third.

Other than his writing, the most important part of Crouch's legacy might be his powerful influence on Wynton Marsalis, and his impact upon the development of what we now know as Jazz at Lincoln Center. Appropriately, Mr. Marsalis spoke first.

Befitting a trumpeter who has mastered the craft of saying a lot in a short amount of time — like the best players of the premodern era, he can say something meaningful in only 16 or even eight bars — Mr. Marsalis summarized his 35-year friendship in a few choice words and anecdotes. He concluded by reading a particularly glorious passage that, he said, was the last piece Crouch had sent to him, and which is now part of the new collection.

Along the course of the evening, his editor, Glenn Mott, and the dean of Columbia Journalism School, writer Jelani Cobb, spoke as well. The other major testimonials were delivered by musicians, usually before and after performances — again, how Stanley would have wanted it.

There were essentially three ensembles, each of which represented a different aspect of jazz. First, there was a trio featuring Cyrus Chestnut and Sean Mason alternating on piano, bassist Christian McBride, and drummer Jeff "Tain" Watts. They were fronted on several pieces by the excellent singer Tammy McCann. Mr. Mason led the trio in Thelonious Monk's "Evidence," and Mr. Chestnut did what he does better than anybody — play the blues. For all of the virtuosity of these players, especially Mr. Chestnut, in the scheme of the evening they exemplified the rootsier side of the music.

The second group was a quartet of saxophonist David Murray, trombonist Ray Anderson, bassist Mark Dresser, and drummer Andrew Cyrille. Their three numbers represented what we sometimes call free jazz or the avant-garde, though those weren't necessarily the terms that Crouch would have used. Of all those present, they went back the furthest with Stanley, particularly Messrs. Dresser and Cyrille.

This was the kind of music that Stanley himself played when he was trying to make it as a drummer. The quartet served to illustrate a kind of alternative future for jazz, and their best and most Stanley-like number was also a blues. One looks forward to more appearances by Mr. Murray and company at JALC.

The climax of the evening was a lovely set by pianist Bill Charlap's long-running trio with bassist Peter Washington and drummer Kenny Washington, honoring the greatest aristocrat in all of American music, Duke Ellington. Ducal classics like "Mood Indigo," "Love You Madly," and "Prelude to a Kiss" amount to nothing less than the most sophisticated and at the same time the earthiest jazz ever created, the kind of music that's perfect for an upscale penthouse-type space like Dizzy's.

While I'll never pass up a chance to hear Messrs. Charlap or Murray or Chestnut, the star of the evening was Ms. McCann, whose timing was excellent — not least in that she's just released a new album, titled "Do I Move You?" Ms. McCann is based at Chicago and no less palpably rooted in the music of the church. She's played Dizzy's before, but she doesn't appear in New York nearly enough.

On the album especially, Ms. McCann draws inspiration from another empowered female icon, the mighty Nina Simone, as a spirit guide into the adjacent fields of blues, jazz, and standards. From Simone, she found her own way into "Do I Move You," Anthony Newley's "Feelin' Good," and Simone's "Blackbird," which she astutely juxtaposes with the Paul McCartney song of the same title. The album includes Jackson's "Canaan Land," and she closed the Dizzy's set with a glorious "Wade in the Water."

She too has a natural affinity for the Duke Ellington-Billy Strayhorn songbook, as manifested on the album with "Don't You Know I Care," a lesser known ballad with church-like organ accompaniment, and "A Flower is a Lovesome Thing," as an understated duet with guitarist Fareed Haque.

The high point of the Dizzy's show was her stunning tete-a-tete with Mr. Chestnut on "Come Sunday," Ellington's most beloved sample of Sacred Music. With this all-star group and Ms. McCann at the front of the bandstand, there can be no doubt that victory is indeed assured.



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Mr. Friedwald writes about music and popular culture for The New York Sun and other publications. The host of the radio show ‘Sing! Sing! Sing!’ on San Diego KSDS on Saturday mornings, he also is the author of 10 books. He has written more than 600 liner notes for compact discs, received 11 Grammy nominations, and appears frequently on television and in documentaries.
