Sample Concert Review

Jazz and Popular Music in America

The James Ware Quintet, Live at the Bebop Cafe

On Thursday, March 4, 1999, I had the pleasure of hearing the James Ware Quintet at the Bebop Cafe. The quintet consisted of James Ware on saxophone and flute, Brandon Gibbs on trumpet, Ben Wilson on acoustic piano, Chris Eubanks on acoustic bass, and Andrew Hilton on drums. They played a mixture of hard bop and modal jazz.

The Bebop Cafe, Miami’s newest jazz club, is located in the Lincoln Road Mall in Miami Beach. It is small and intimate, providing a perfect setting for hearing live jazz. The band performs on a small stage at one end of the room. A baby grand piano takes up almost half of the stage. The club features live jazz seven nights a week. A cover charge of $5 is added to the bill, there is also a two drink minimum.

The band began their set with “Straight, No Chaser,” a 12-bar blues by Thelonius Monk. The highly syncopated melody made it difficult to count bars (the band members, on their break, confirmed it was a 12-bar blues). Rhythmic feel was swing: bassist Chris Eubanks played a walking bass line and ride rhythms were played on the cymbals as the pianist Ben Wilson “comped” chords behind the soloists. Extended solos were played by the saxophonist, trumpeter, pianist, and bassist, in that order. Before returning to the melody statement, the two horns “traded fours” with the drummer. This was the most exciting part of the piece, with Andrew Hilton showing off his tremendous technique on the drums.

The second piece was “Look to the Sky.” The rhythmic style was a type of Latin or Brazilian groove; the bass line was neither walking nor two-beat. For this composition James Ware switched to flute, and trumpeter Gibbs used a harmon mute. They blended together nicely as they played the melody in unison. Overall this piece had a more relaxed sound than the first, it reminded me of background music one might hear in a supermarket.

The pace picked up again with the Miles Davis composition “Milestones.” Rhythmic feel was swing and the form AABB. The musicians later informed me that this composition from the mid-1950’s is an example of modal jazz. Following trumpet, piano, and saxophone solos, Hilton launched into an extended, bombastic drum solo. Hilton is fun to watch, and his
solos received the most applause that evening.

Saxophonist/leader James Ware was featured on the next piece “Autumn in New York.” The melody was played rubato, with only piano accompaniment. The bass and drums entered at the beginning of Ware’s first improvised chorus. A double-time piano solo followed. Trumpeter Gibbs did not play on this selection. At the conclusion of the piece Ware played a cadenza. His style and light, airy sound on this ballad reminded me of Lester Young.

“So What” featured bassist Eubanks playing the melody. After each phrase of the melody the rest of the band played a riff in call and response fashion. The set closer was “The Theme,” another Miles Davis composition. Ware and trumpeter Gibbs traded “eights”, then “fours”, and “twos,” before soloing together (collective improvisation). This created an exciting conclusion to the set. The interplay between the two horn players was amazing to witness. As each player tried to “out-blow” the other, they pushed each other to new musical heights. Often a musical idea played by one musician would be finished or embellished by the other.

Before leaving the club I was able to speak briefly with the musicians; they were very helpful in answering my questions about the music. This was my first experience hearing live jazz in a nightclub. I enjoyed both the music and the ambiance of the club, and I plan to return there soon.