

Lynne Arriale Trio: Live at the Montreux Jazz Festival

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For the majority of jazz artists it's an uphill struggle for exposure in America, and the climb is twice as steep for female instrumentalists. No wonder they spend more time touring overseas. Nevertheless, it is with some embarrassment that I admit that I never heard about Lynne Arriale before being asked to review this incredible CD. Somehow Ms. Arriale with her phenomenal trio snuck under my radar, and now they have made a sneak attack and stolen my heart and mind, if not my soul. The up side to this embarrassment is the joy of a new discovery.

With seven years and six recordings behind them, the Lynne Arriale Trio was more than ready for their first live recording. Earning wonderful reviews, more akin to testimonials than critiques, the accolades have been pouring in since the beginning, making it difficult for a new devotee (that's me) to write yet another rave review without seeming over the top. But I will try.

Ms. Arriale claims to be a latecomer to the jazz world but she speaks the language as if born to it. She is both a highly emotional and an intellectual player. Her intellect is evident in her improvisational forays as she builds and stretches each composition. Using a myriad of hues and timbres, Arriale strikes emotional chords that are deep and universal, without once resorting to cliché or artifice.

The trio – with Jay Anderson on bass and Steve Davis on drums – opens with “Alone Together” and immediately captures the audience's attention. The piano's thick chords are soon juxtaposed with a clear single-line melody. As they take off at a hot tempo you are swept into a vortex. The bass takes a solo while you rest, suspended in the eye of a storm, but then you sucked back into the vortex where the music is punctuated by drum breaks that carry you along until the melody is reprised and the storm ends ever so gently. It's no wonder the audience cheers.

The second selection, “Evidence,” is one of the two Thelonious Monk pieces in the set. Slowing the pace, Arriale wanders into the musical mind of Monk and somehow makes Monk's musical madness comprehensible. In a mood of exploration and intrigue, her fingers probe the intricacies of Monk's genius, forging a path through unusual harmonics that my ears willingly follow.

Arriale displays a devotion to melodic and harmonic nuances that many artists today ignore in their relentless pursuit of flashy and dazzling technique. “With Words Unspoken” is an Arriale original. Its gentle meandering melody, complimented by Davis' extraordinarily sensitive percussion, takes you to unexpected places that are simultaneous unique for each listener yet universally the same. I imagine the unspoken words from a lover during a slow fiery red sunset at the end of a long sweet summer. What will you hear?

Picking up the tempo, the trio lets loose on “Seven Steps to Heaven” by Miles Davis. While it is easy for some musicians to fall prey to playing only for themselves – especially at up tempos – this group never once loses its cohesive whole, and even during an intricate drum solo the intensity with which they listen and respond to one another is clear at all times.

Bassist Jay Anderson leads the way into “Think of One.” Taken at a moderate tempo, this tune is replete with the eccentric rhythms and quasi dissonances characteristic of Monk. I'm a sucker for a bass player who gets down into the guts of the instrument and isn't afraid to play a few great big goose eggs instead of fretful rapid fire runs up and down the scale. Happily, Anderson gets to stretch out on this one.

The bossa-tinged ballad “Estate” has all of the complexity and delicacy of a spider web. From the beginning to the end of this nine-minute track, goose bumps ripple through my soul and I am caught in this perfectly formed, beautiful trap. After Ms Arriale proves once again that a beautiful melody can stand alone, she adds layers while twisting and turning the lines as if reflected through a prism. The beautiful melodic bass solo is laden with pregnant notes and again, as is true throughout, Davis' percussive contributions are so tasteful and delicate at times that I feel I must call your attention to the lyricism in his playing.

The live concert was supposed to end with “Calypso,” a high spirited and energetic romp by Arriale. Not the bounce-off-the-walls energy of a sugar-high seven year old, but the slow-building, fire-stoking powerhouse energy that goes the distance and leaves you rejuvenated rather than exhausted. It is no surprise that the audience would not let this group leave the stage; cheering and whistling, they demanded one more tune.

The CD concludes with the encore. Even if you don't remember the 1950s movie starring Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr, this tear-jerking rendition of “An Affair to Remember” illuminates the power of melodic simplicity. Arriale holds the audience spellbound with a single-line execution of the melody followed by a deceptively simple improvisation.

Anyone who has not yet heard this visionary artist and her trio is missing out. Their music is not only emotionally evocative, but raises your musical sensibilities. It is intelligent music, but not in the sense of over-intellectualizing; this sound comes straight from the spirit. I wish for Ms. Arriale and her group the wider recognition that their talents deserve and I hope to find her itinerary filled with more engagements here in America.