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Letting an Ensemble Complete Him

Christian aTunde Adjuah Brings New Sound to a Jazz Festival

By NATE CHINEN MAY 9, 2014

Christian aTunde Adjuah has a firm, cold flash of a trumpet sound, like the glint off a brandished switchblade. For what seems like the entirety of his playing career, since his anointed adolescence in New Orleans, he has deployed that sound with an effortful assurance: rallying support with it, building bands around it, making it the base currency of his brisk economy of style.

But he has been shifting his emphasis slightly, judging by a sold-out concert at Harlem Stage Gatehouse on Thursday night. A centerpiece of the Harlem Jazz Shrines Festival, it was also the premiere of Mr. Adjuah's new 10-piece band, featuring two drummers and an array of wind and rhythm instruments. Among the shrewd manifestations of struggle in the music — a specialty of Mr. Adjuah's, maybe even the essence of his brand — there was an intriguing new one, a tug-of-war between clarity and turbidity.

As a soloist, Mr. Adjuah, 31, formerly known as Christian Scott, could almost be clarity in the flesh. He's a testifier and a catharsis engine, drawn to brusque, epigrammatic phrases that recall the exhortative cadence of New Orleans brass bands. This was as much his strategy on the opening tune, a soulful processional titled "The Last Chieftain," as on "West of the West," which closed the set over a deep, asymmetrical funk groove.

Playing several custom horns — the most striking of which, the Sirenette, faintly suggests a sculptural form by Gaudí — Mr. Adjuah cut the figure of an aesthete-provocateur, expertly conveying steep emotion with his tone. But for all of that terse emphasis, he rarely saw fit to thread his points into a propulsive arc.

For that, it turned out, he had the band. Anchored by Corey Fonville on drums, and Joe Dyson on an electronic percussion pad, with Max Moran on acoustic bass, Cliff Hines on electric guitar, Lawrence Fields on piano and Warren Wolf on vibraphone, the ensemble never lacked for atmospheric texture or drive.

The rhythm section made a compelling case on “Stretch Music,” in a compound-triplet roil that evoked the trippier side of electronic music, and “New Orleanian Love Song,” which began in thunderous abstraction before settling into a derivation of parade rhythm (with a sinuous R&B vocal turn by Mr. Adjuah’s wife, Isadora Mendez-Scott).

Mr. Adjuah marshaled his front line — himself, Elena Pinderhughes on flute, Braxton Cook on alto saxophone and Corey King on trombone — with crisp order, often dividing a melody between two pairs of players. They presented a strong and unified front, even when one of their rank stepped into the spotlight.

Ms. Pinderhughes, who is 19, did so brilliantly on a drowsy funk ballad called “Completely,” improvising with boppish fluency but a relaxed sense of phrase and line. Introducing her warmly, as he did with everyone onstage, Mr. Adjuah marveled at her precocity and noted that this was her first performance with the band. It was tough to exchange volleys with her, he added. He was laughing but seemed entirely earnest.

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