



Saxophonist plays serious jazz for serious fans

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Jazz is about communication. It's about observing, synthesizing, summarizing and finally restating, all in real time, right on the spot.

And, yes, it's about sharing all that with the audience, too.

The Joe Lovano Quartet was in Royce Auditorium on Thursday for a thrilling evening of classic and contemporary jazz by the classic and contemporary Lovano on tenor and soprano sax.

Lovano's a classic, not in the sense that he's past his prime, but in the sense that he's got one foot planted firmly in the past.

Just one. This innovator is moving forward with the other one. Original material plus tunes by Billy Strayhorn, Ornette Coleman and Thelonious Monk filled the evening of serious jazz for serious fans.

Lovano's big tenor tone -- sometimes dry as a martini, sweet in the altissimo register -- wrapped itself around music that touched on bop, ballad and free jazz.

The opening of his set was a little mystifying as an introduction. "Streams" and "Cool," a couple of quiet and atmospheric tunes from his suite "Streams of Expressions," eventually moved from cerebral probing to progressive acceleration.

Strayhorn's "My Little Brown Book" began as a breezy ballad and eventually got cooking. Coleman's "Lonely Woman," a minor jazz standard, gave the quartet some elbow room to stretch their legs.

Lovano's partners on Thursday were first-class players, anchored by Cameron Brown, a "little engine that could" on bass.

Pianist James Weidman proved to be a player of uncommon melodic gifts in a bebop setting. Drummer Lewis Nash garnered the applause for his showmanship, but I was particularly impressed with his musical approach to drumming with wide-ranging dynamics and attacks.

Monk's "Four in One" was a triumph for the quartet, which kept the audience guessing as the form blurred and the bottom dropped out. The musicians, however, did not.

Though Lovano's a contemporary giant on the horn, the 55-year-old saxman presumably has many years ahead of him, particularly when you consider he was the kid on his latest recording, "Kids," which paired him with 89-year-old Hank Jones on piano, a recording that's up for a Grammy Award next month.

St. Cecilia's new Jazz Series felt a little like its old series, Classic Jazz in a Classic Setting, which thrived for a while and eventually went under several years ago. It's nice to have some of it back.