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Double duty from a Lovano quintet

By David R. Adler

For The Inquirer

Saxophonist Joe Lovano has worked in many configurations, from orchestras to nonets to duos, since he began recording in the mid-'80s. Us Five, the band he brought to Chris' Jazz Cafe on Thursday, was again something different: a quintet with two drummers, Francisco Mela and Otis Brown 3d.

> Positioned on either end of the bandstand, the drummers grinned at each other and seemed to approach their situation as a game.

> First, the young Mela joined Lovano and veteran bassist Cameron Brown, swinging hard in 4

4 while Otis Brown waited. Without dropping the beat, they switched, and Brown, who is not related to the bassist, kept strong, fluid time under James Weidman's piano solo.

> In a sense, the band was two trios.

> There were times, however, when Lovano wanted a double-strength cannonade of simultaneous percussion. He got it during the finale, an up-tempo treatment of John Coltrane's "Fifth House."

> "My Little Brown Book," the Billy Strayhorn ballad, framed Lovano's tenor in a softer, warmer light, less Coltrane and more Ben Webster, reflecting his omnivorous ease with jazz tradition.

> More pervasive still was the influence of Ornette Coleman, on the bustling original "Ettenro" ("Ornette" backward) and Coleman's unfathomably dark "Lonely Woman."

> As Otis Brown nudged the latter into a trancelike vamp, Lovano moved from an unusually rich-sounding soprano sax to an aulochrome - essentially two sopranos cobbled together, allowing Lovano to play polyphonically and create counterpoint.


> Parts of the set, including "Us Five," "Topsy Turvy" and the multipart "Dawn of Time," were arrayed in a suite, with elements woven together by solo drum interludes and out-of-tempo musings. The themes were devilish in their detail - sequences of halting, corkscrew rhythm set up the densely patterned improvisations.

> Lovano's sandpapery tone and liquid phrasing gave a rich contrast, as always. His keening legato passages and hyperspeed bundles of notes kept his listeners, including his band, consistently on edge.

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