



Jay Jackson

JAY JACKSON is one of the busiest jazz vocalists in the greater Los Angeles area. His 3-octave baritone voice has been called a hypnotic mix of Lou Rawls, Johnny Hartman and Tom Jones. This two time Emmy-winning journalist (CBS News LA), actor and vocalist has performed with giants such as Nancy Wilson (Vino Jazz Festival) Oleta Adams (Barclay Theater) and sax great, Azar Lawrence (Jazz for Lovers). Jay is known nationwide as the lovable "Perd Hapley" on NBC's hit sitcom "Parks & Recreation" starring Amy Poehler. He performs every Sunday night at the Industry Cafe and Jazz in Culver City with his band, The Standard Funk Trio. You can visit his website: jayjacksonjazz.com

Colombo's - Eagle Rockin' (Feb 24, 2012)

All told, this is a fine jam session. Colombo's comfort-inspiring, wood-paneled walls and friendly service only adds to the top-shelf level of the night (the meatball steak is seriously tasty). I'm told they've been doing this for at least the past ten years, here. Keep this up, and another ten will fly by before you know it.

There are some places that treat jam sessions as if they're just a time for fun, nothing serious - just friends getting together and if you don't know what you're doing on some songs, no big deal.

Then there are places where everyone who gets on the microphone or on the bandstand is there to do their best. They're at the event to show they have chops. That's the kind of jam session **Colombo's** (1833 Colorado Blvd, Eagle Rock) holds on Monday nights.

I realized that when I first walked in. Sitting at a leather-trimmed booth, waiting to play, was one of LA's greatest bassists, Bill Markus. A veteran who's played with the likes of Roy Hargrove, Kevin Mahogany and Terence Blanchard just to name a few, Markus is the kind of player this reporter would gladly pay good cash to see and hear. And here he was, just waiting in line like the other players. Needless to say, the house bassist, Leslie Baker holds her own with anyone on the instrument. She knows how to get the party started, singing, bopping and walking bass lines that can make a dead man swing. Add to that, laid-back bass master Harry Smith, then you know you've got something special. And that's just for bassists.

On drums is a jazz legend, Frank Wilson. A giant who has traversed the globe several times with B-3 god, Jimmy Smith and vocal lord Ernie Andrews, Wilson keeps it laid back, cool and tasty, but ready to erupt at a moments notice.

Then, leading it all is the profoundly charming Erik Ekstrand. His piano work ranges from boogie-woogie, to a Bill Evans-like West Coast cool that puts you on notice... this cat is the real deal. Don't let the theatrical toupee and boyish facade fool you. Ekstrand is music personified.

Throughout the night, the house band was joined by some top-notch players that truly know how to swing. Pianist Gary Blumer hit the keys several times, playing Cole Porter's 1954 classic, "All of You" with a litheness that gave the often-played tune a new feel altogether. Pianist Sonny Na laid down some fine work as well. She charges hard, riding "high in the saddle." But it's never over the top. Another instrumental stand-out was Barry Mosely on valve trombone. Clearly a student of valve giant Bob Brookmeyer, Mosely's tone was soft, sweet and hypnotic, yet thick with power and drive. This is a man who practices... long and often.

Singers were out in force, as well. If this were a contest, vocalist Norrell Thompson walked away with top honors. Her earthy version of Adams & Roy's '34 classic, "What A Difference A Day Made", zapped the talkative audience into watching the stage instead of talking... rather loudly (Chatter is always a sign of the class level of the venue. Note to mangers: it's okay to gently encourage guests to keep their conversations low during the show. This isn't a sports bar, after all). Too bad Thompson only did one tune. I'd like to have heard more. Also, vocalist Alison Lewis pulled off a surprisingly soulful "My Funny Valentine". The Rogers and Hart tune is done way too often at jam sessions, but Lewis' version had a meter and verve that made it cool to listen to. I just hope it's the last time a high quality singer like Lewis does this. With a voice so elegant, it deserves a more serious challenge than this standard, which is truly becoming tired.

Other notable singers included Gina D'Nofrio who took on the always difficult "Nature Boy". She handled the challenging song well... thanks in no small part to the band that never missed a beat. And, singer Jackie Cane had the crowd swinging with Israel Baline's (Irving Berlin) ditty, "Cheek to Cheek."

Now for the tough part. Singers Downie and Viva Vinson could gain a thing or two from the previously mentioned singers. Both singers have magnificent voices. Also, they both have powerful stage presence. Downie (Alfie, Under My Skin) and Vinson (God Bless The Child) have 'star' written all over them. But, they both come across too forward and frenzied. Never forget, jazz is performed "back in the cut." In other words, the singer or player has to look relaxed, as if saying this big sound I'm giving you is effortless. It's like in football... the great players don't do cheesy touchdown dances. They simply hand the ball to the ref and move on. It says 'I've done this. I'm a veteran at it.' Great singers use their gift to do all the dancing. Downie and Vinson's performance could be so much better if they remember this. Again, these are two great voices with star-power. Just tone it down some. We all see and hear your greatness... you don't have to throw it at us.

But here is the most important point I want to make. This jam session HAS NO BREAKS!. Why is that important? Nothing can suck the energy out of a jam session more than the irritating breaks in the playing. If you have 20 musicians waiting to play, what are you taking a break for? At Colombo's, Ekstrand masterfully rotated the players, creating a seamless, continuous night of music. Different drummers, different bassists (and boy does Bill Markus play a mean bow. The best I've heard), and different piano players. Take note jam session hosts... come here and get a lesson on how to run a jam session. There's no need for the music to stop when you have a room full of musicians waiting to play.

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