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Live Review: Atlanta Jazz Festival 2019

Highlights included Christian Sands, Marcus Strickland, and a wide array of bassists

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Marcus Strickland at the 2019 Atlanta Jazz Festival (photo: Terence Rushin)

If you're smart, when you attend the Atlanta Jazz Festival in 93-degree heat and unrelenting sun with zero breeze, you do what a lot of the audience did: bring a canopy or tent, wheel up a cooler, put down some lightweight chairs, and stay all day at one of the three stages. If you're a jazz correspondent, you insist on seeing all 13 acts (partial sets, at least), walking briskly between the three stages for nine hours or so until you're covered in sweat and grime and your feet are blistered. You suffer for the music, but the music rewards you.

The festival, free and open to the public, took place in Atlanta's Piedmont Park over Memorial Day weekend, and the Saturday (May 25) lineup was especially promising. It began at the Park Drive Stage, the smallest of the three, with Atlanta's Avery Dixon, a young man who defied bleak medical odds (he weighed under two pounds at birth) to become a promising alto and tenor saxophonist with a David Sanborn-ish aesthetic. He had a band of pros, playing music steeped in R&B with a crossover sensibility.

It makes sense in a way to view the Atlanta festival's offerings through the lens of one instrument: the bass. In many instances, the basses were electric at the Park Drive, Oak Hill, and Meadow Stage (the largest) on Saturday. And the music had varying degrees of electric thrust, likely less a conscious programming decision than an indication of where jazz, in all its post-genre hybridity, finds itself today. Yet this was far from one of those much-lamented "jazz" festivals that features no jazz. The jazz in Atlanta was real and high-level—even if the boundaries and definitions of that word were stretched every which way.

Tenor saxophonist Ofer Assaf came to the Oak Hill Stage with what can only be called a fusion supergroup: guitarist Alex Skolnick, bassist Lincoln Goines, and drummer Robby Ameen. Assaf was Michael Brecker-esque in approach, and his music, buoyed by these monster players, had sparks of invention. Vocalist Alicia Olatuja had Michael Olatuja (her husband) on bass, not to mention consummate pianist Jon Cowherd, bringing an improvisatory spirit to her material. Her soul/pop/jazz leanings were in line with the other two vocalists on the bill: Rhonda Ross, who performed in a small group with her husband and pianist Rodney Kendrick, and the 9 p.m. headliner Lizz Wright. Giving lots of room to her musicians (including guitarist Adam Levy and bassist/backing vocalist Ben Zwerin), Wright rang in nightfall with that smoky low register of hers, a balm after a long day.

Rhonda Ross at the 2019 Atlanta Jazz Festival (photo: Terence Rushin)

Among the other electric bassists was Junius Paul, who played with drummer and rising-star bandleader Makaya McCraven, closing out the Park Drive Stage. The set was thick with absorbing beats, graceful melodic themes, and the hazy interweaving sonic colors of Brandee Younger's harp, Jeff Parker's guitar, and Joel Ross' vibes and marimba. Rashaan Carter played electric bass in trumpeter Takuya Kuroda's band, a confidently strutting sextet with trombone (Corey King) and tenor sax (Craig Hill). Slick tempo shifts and superb Fender Rhodes solos from Takeshi Ohbayashi snapped a late afternoon crowd to attention at the Oak Hill Stage. Next, bassist/vocalist Richard Bona closed out Oak Hill with a Cuban-themed project and characteristic onstage hilarity: "Let me introduce you to this cute, sexy band," he said, following up audience laughter with, "Oh yes we are." The jaw-dropping pianism of Osmany Paredes, however, was no joke.

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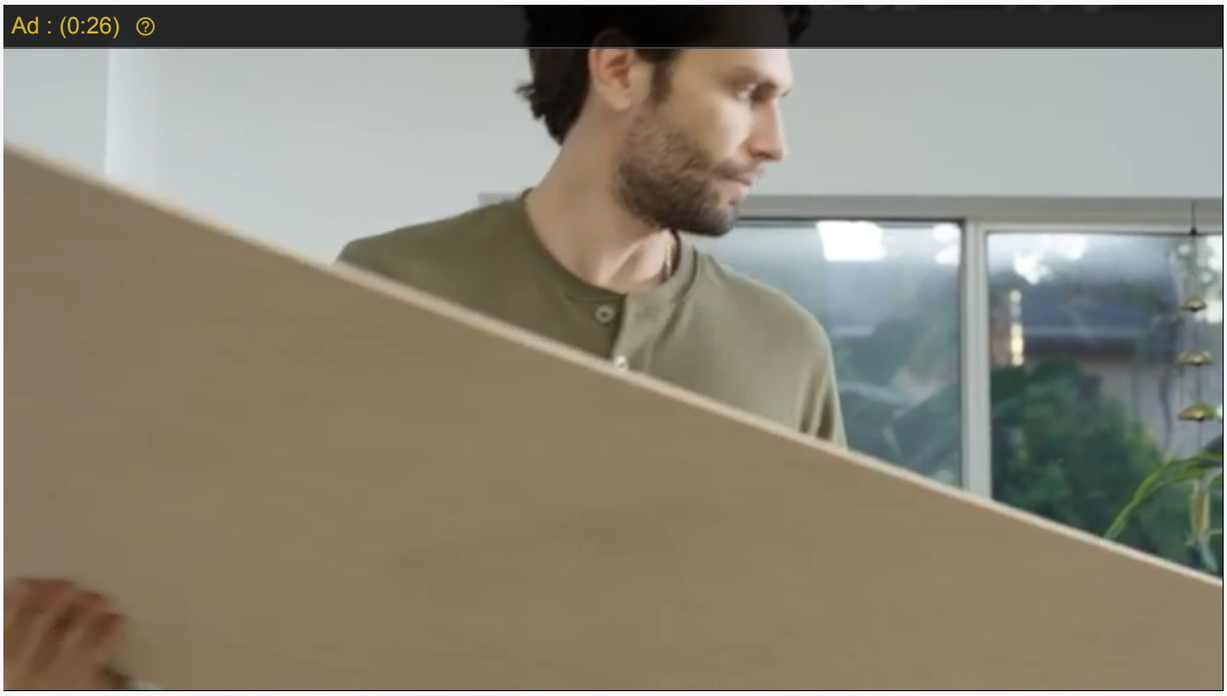

The best electric bassist of the day, with an absolute command of sound and feel, was Antoine Katz with Marcus Strickland's Twi-Life. In for Strickland's longtime bassist Kyle Miles, Katz locked in with drummer Charles Haynes as Mitch Henry's organ/keyboards and Strickland's tenor sax and bass clarinet cast a spell over a growing early evening crowd at the Meadow Stage. With the inclusion of vocalist Christie Dashiell and notable Queens rapper Pharoahe Monch, Strickland's set went full hip-hop on renditions of Monch's "Push" and "Still Standing."

Christian Sands at the 2019 Atlanta Jazz Festival (photo: Terence Rushin)

Upright bass had a presence in Atlanta as well. Delfeayo Marsalis, clad in a fantastically white sport coat and red pants, led an acoustic lineup and played fine, bop-oriented trombone solos in what he was calling the band's "Global Warming Suite" (with such tunes as "Autumn Leaves" and "Summertime"). Pianist Christian Sands was easily one of the day's most memorable performers, in a trio at Park Drive with bassist Yasushi Nakamura and drummer Jerome Jennings. Sands' virtuosity was sparkling and impeccably clear, the trio's rapport explosive—close your eyes and you'd think you were hearing a blissful set at the Village Vanguard.

Joel Ross and Stefon Harris, celebrated vibraphonists a generation apart, both of whom have had major career breakthroughs on Blue Note Records, played partially overlapping sets in Atlanta. For a bit, when Ross' band stopped playing at Park Drive, you could hear Harris down the hill and across the big field at

Meadow Stage. Both were using upright bass: Kanoa Mendenhall, the sole woman bassist at the festival, played with Ross, while Luques Curtis took up with Harris' long-running ensemble Blackout. Ross played material from his Blue Note debut *KingMaker* and Harris drew from his latest for Motéma, *Sonic Creed*.

Joel Ross at the 2019 Atlanta Jazz Festival (photo: Sarah Htun)

Far more the onstage talker than Ross, Harris acknowledged the various relatives who'd come out to hear him: "Come on, if you're black, you got family in Atlanta somewhere." He mentioned his hometown of Albany, New York, jokingly calling it "the original A-town." But mostly Harris played the vibraphone and marimba with formidable technique, exquisite touch, and palpable joy. Like Harris, Ross has a physical relationship to the instrument, a kind of dance that gives every solo its inner momentum. To go back and forth and see each of them dance their music into being, practically within sight of one another at the same festival, was constant cause for fascination.

DAVID R. ADLER

David R. Adler writes about jazz and assorted topics. His work has appeared in *JazzTimes, NPR Music, WBGO.org, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Village Voice, DownBeat, Time Out New York*, and many other publications. From 2010-2017 he taught jazz history at the Aaron Copland School of Music (Queens College-CUNY). In summer 2017, after 30 years in New York (apart from two in Philadelphia), David relocated with his family to Athens, Georgia. There he continues to write about music and perform solo as a guitarist/vocalist.

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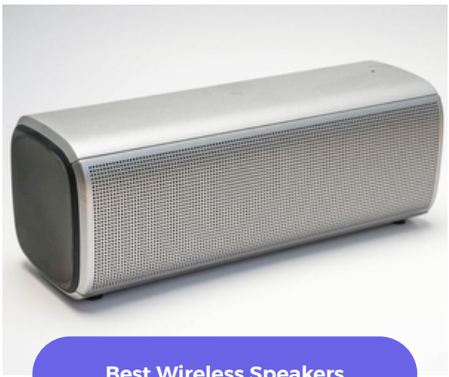

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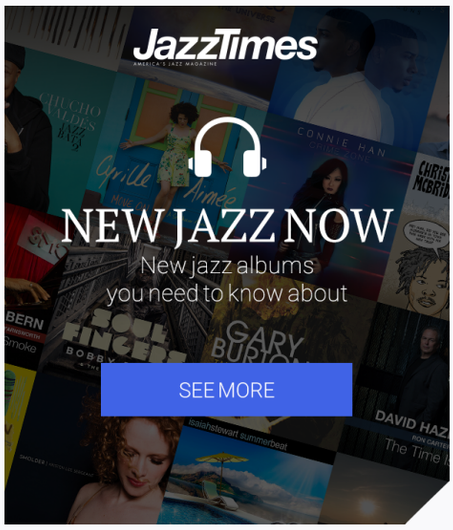

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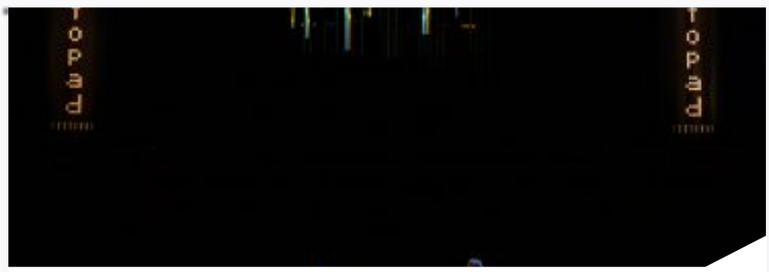

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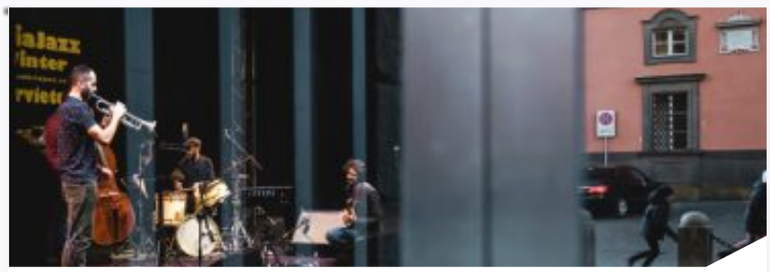

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