



Wayne Shorter's Spontaneous Art

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An hour before pianist Danilo Pérez went onstage with the Wayne Shorter Quartet on April 28 at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Theater, he was asked what the group would be playing. He laughed.

"We never know, man." Well, how did it go last night? "It was exciting—and scary."

Mere mortals might find it hard to imagine playing a show at New York's foremost jazz venue, for which the top ticket price was \$120, and not having a clue about the set list. But for Shorter's spectacular sidemen—Pérez, bassist John Patitucci and drummer Brian Blade—it's all in a night's work.

This quartet, an unsurpassed improvisational machine, specializes in the impossible: music that seems impossible to write or play (unless you happen to be a member). Of course, they could rely on the formidable body of work of Shorter, one of jazz's greatest living composers, but apparently that's not enough of a challenge.

Instead, they create new music every night—an in-the-moment mix of hair-raising group improv with occasional references to Shorter's book. They like to call it "comprovisation." Although the style is nominally post-bop, the music is as unique as the virtuosos who play it.

More importantly, it is the realization of Shorter's singular vision. Over the course of a six-decade career, his music often has been called cerebral; actually, it's metaphysical. A practicing Buddhist for decades, his creations clearly come from a deeply spiritual place where nothing is more important than the moment. The Lincoln Center audience was totally absorbed, but it was absorption more of the ecstatic kind than the intellectual kind.

Before the show, Patitucci had revealed that Shorter, 78, was still recovering from gall-bladder surgery only a week earlier. "But he came back yesterday and played hard all night," Patitucci said. "It's so selfless of him."

At the Rose Theater, the quartet opened with a sustained 37-minute improvisation that began with an other-worldly chromatic melody line played by Pérez in the piano's upper register, set against dissonant clusters, alternating ostinatos and cello-like bowing by Patitucci, along with Blade's urgent side-stick, cymbal and hi-hat work. Taking it all in, Shorter, slightly stooped in a black tunic, leaned on the Steinway, listening intently before entering with a few breathy whole notes on tenor. He was clearly pacing himself. As the improvisation built up a head of steam, gentle contemplation gave way to toots, whoops and grunts, then full-force legato runs; now he was all the way back and in command.

These players listen hard to each other. "Wayne always wants us to take big chances and be vulnerable enough to reach out your arms and take the other guys with you and go together," Patitucci explained. "He's one of the most unselfish people to play with—he always leaves space for the other musicians. He has no shortage of technique, but he has no need to show off. His playing is deeply emotional—it's not just craft."

Nevertheless, there was marvelous craft on display: Pérez's dazzling classical technique, at times evoking French Impressionism; Patitucci's quick, daring leaps up the neck to the upper register; and Blade flinging himself around the kit like a mad marionette, sometimes looking as though the drums were playing *him*.

If it seemed as if there were five "songs" in the 100-minute concert, it was only that the audience, confronted with pauses in the action, interpreted them as endings and interrupted with applause. Along the way, the group alighted upon several Shorter classics, including "Joy Ryder," "She Moves Through The Fair" and "Plaza Real," as well as the more recent "Starry Night" and "Zero Gravity." In a tip of the hat to more traditional jazz, the quartet encored with the poignant standard "All By Myself." Shorter played it straight, stating the haunting melody on soprano, before he and Pérez deconstructed it with expert support from Patitucci and Blade.

But this evening was not about the past. It was about creating beauty together in the moment. Pérez recalled an anecdote from long ago: Before an important concert, he asked the old master, "Are we going to rehearse?" "He answered, 'You can't rehearse the unknown.'"

— Allen Morrison



Danilo Pérez (left) and Wayne Shorter (Photo: Fran Kaufman)

