

## The Branford Marsalis Quartet Takes a Wild Ride at Yoshi's

Saxophonist **Branford Marsalis**'s quartet is one of jazz's most formidable working bands, a casually virtuosic ensemble whose players take evident delight in each other's company. Pianist Joey Calderazzo and bassist Eric Revis have been touring and recording with the eldest Marsalis sibling since the late 1990s, and are both acclaimed recording artists themselves. The band's latest arrival, other-worldly drummer Justin Faulkner, joined the group in 1999 at the age of 18, stepping with aplomb into the imposing shoes of the universally venerated Jeff "Tain" Watts. Despite his junior status in the band, he's the straw that stirs the drink, a riveting performer with a dynamic range as deep as any drummer on the scene.

Thursday, Nov. 7's 10 p.m. show at Yoshi's concluded the quartet's three-night run at the club, offering an increasingly rare island of hard-core jazz in a calendar now dominated by old and new-school R&B, various strains of soul, hip-hop, and pop. Kicking off with Calderazzo's "The Mighty Sword," a tumbling head-over-heels theme introduced on Marsalis's 2012 album *Four MFs Playin' Tunes* (Sony), the band sounded like it was barreling down a steep hill with no brakes. The wheels never quite flew off in opposite directions, thanks to the unflappable presence of Revis's grounding bass lines, but Marsalis pushed his soprano sax to the edge of distortion slashing through Faulkner's trap set pummeling.

Like the best second sets, it felt like stepping into the middle of a fast-flowing conversation mid-stream, full of half-stated inside jokes, ironic repartee, vivid anecdotes, and knowing silences. While the quartet has an extensive book of originals, they drew more on the standard repertoire. Marsalis positively crooned with his tenor sax on Ralph Rainger and Leo Robin's "If I Should Lose You," then turned Thelonious Monk's rarely played but utterly entrancing tune "Teo" into an extended, ferociously swinging excursion on **Mr. Toad's Wild Ride**.

Deftly shifting tempos and turning the heat back down to a slow simmer, the quartet sauntered through “On the Sunny Side of the Street” showing no hurry to get into the shade. Back on soprano sax, Marsalis rendered Jimmy McHugh’s sinuous melody with exaggerated beauty, as if high stepping in slow motion down the avenue. Supported by the feathery touch of Faulkner’s brushes, the concluding note of each phrase emerged from the bell of Marsalis horn like a poppy’s bloom rendered in time-lapse photography.

Though pianist Calderazzo has spent 20 years with Marsalis after getting his start touring and recording with Michael Brecker (arguably the most influential saxophonist of the 1980s and 90s), he’s too rarely mentioned as a leading voice on his instrument. Whether playing a ballad or a burner, his percussive touch makes his notes crackle and pop, and his puckish sense of humor serves as a fricative foil for Marsalis’s sardonic sensibility.

The saxophonist never mentioned the excellent latest album, ***The Secret Between the Shadow and the Soul*** (Okeh/Sony Masterworks), which came out in March. In truth, the band is an advertisement for itself. For an encore the quartet delivered a different shade of beauty with Sidney Bechet’s “Petite Fleur,” an unlikely pop hit first recorded by the cantankerous New Orleans giant in 1952 toward the end of his career. Unlike his younger brother Wynton, Branford rarely wears his heritage on his sleeve, and it’s always fascinating to hear him dive into Crescent City situations. Faulkner narrated the voluptuous melody clattering on the rims and a diminutive cymbal he pulled out specifically for the piece. Using a wider vibrato than usual, Marsalis evoked the original soprano sax master, demonstrating the way in which savvy artists can turn jazz’s roots into the hippest expression.



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