

Maldonado Trio

By Michael Handler

One of the good things about going out and hearing music all the time is that "new discovery" thing, as in finding fresh talent with a commitment to the jazz art form. Such was the case a few weeks ago at El Meson (sorry for the delay... a Memphis road trip got in the way...) when I got a tip about the James Maldonado trio. What I heard in one set made me feel I had had a full course jazz meal. The trio consists of James Maldonado on bass, a swingin' Andy Kingston on piano, and the veteran of the group, Cal Haines on drums. The two younger cats are from St. Johns College and had a built-in cheering section in the house the night I was there.

I walked in as the trio was playing a cooled down version of Freedom Jazz Dance, a tune that depends on group dynamics and great timing. (I still think of the late Eddie Jefferson singing that tune when I hear it...) This group had it well in hand, and went on to play a nice ballad culled from the Soundgarden book. Not standard jazz fare, but it worked. On a Latinized version of the be bop standard "Groovin' High", Andy stood up at the piano a la Jerry Lee Lewis during his solo and just rocked it. Very fun. Then the pace slowed again, with a nice rendition of "Just the Two of Us", a pop favorite that is not often heard in a straight ahead setting. But any tune done well is worth doing. The set ended with the iconic "In Walked Bud", with the drummer getting some and showing great cymbal work.

The Maldonado Trio has been together since September, and in that short time have developed almost a cult following, partly due to the personalities of the band members and accessibility of the music. Having a good base of fans, as in college friends, doesn't hurt, and El Meson has allowed them to expand their little scene these last months. (call the club for the schedule...) It's also good to see younger jazz fans get developed in the process. It's refreshing for me to hear these standards and newer tunes "re-worked" as Cal calls it, and be at the beginning of what is hopefully a long-lasting trio. And it's also good to see the cats getting out, with Andy occasionally subbing in the keyboard spot up at the blues jam Tuesday night at El Farol (and he's a fun guy to play with), and James as part of the Nacha Mendez group. Cal, of course, is everywhere.

So as I was leaving, I heard strains of a Dave Matthews tune coming from the bandstand, done in a way I'm sure never heard before, but working. I think Dave would have liked it.