

The Arencon Trio

El Meson Dec. Dec 26th

I've always considered the Chispa Bar at El Meson one of the best jazz rooms in Santa Fe. As an audience member, you can hear the music well, even if there's light chatter in the room. The sight lines are good, and great tapas, wines and deserts are available. As a player, I enjoy the attention of the audience and the fact I can usually hear myself, which is not always the case at other venues. Many of the patrons are there to listen, as they were the Saturday night after Christmas for the Arencon Trio, featuring pianist extraordinaire John Rangel, bass player Luis Guerra, and the bands namesake, drummer Diego Arencon. This well tuned trio twists and turns it's unique way through standards and originals with a fresh approach that bears repeated listening, as it's growing fan base will attest. I like the fact that the "leader" has his drum set canted towards the other musicians, not directly behind the band. This way Diego can more easily see and interact with John and Luis, an important element in creating the spontaneous nature of the sound. The first tune of the set I attended started with an Icarus/ Paul Winter type number with a very pleasant melody line articulated by John on the piano, with a special emphasis on his left hand. (My original notes said "deep left hand"). This slow tempo tune I believe was penned by John Rangel, who contributed quite a few compositions throughout the evening. Next up was Miles Davis's "Solar", swinging for all it was worth in the hands of these veteran players. Diego and Luis were locked in, giving John the space to develop the song in his own way.

I started thinking about these guys, and the fact no one is "better" than anyone else. Their musicianship is not a contest but a collaboration. The dynamics of this group is very interesting as well, with shifting solos and a very unstructured feel to each tune. As I found out later, this is intentional and causes the trio to act with one mind. These are not a bunch of guys who got together playing tunes they knew, but players who sought each other out to collaborate their talents and evolve their jazz voice.

For the last tune, Diego and the trio played my request of Monk's "I Mean You" (thanks, guys). I wanted to see how John would handle Monk's quirkiness, and he didn't disappoint. He attacked the tune head-on, smoothing out Monk's rough edges and putting his personal stamp on it. Luis also had one of his best solos of the night, quoting other Monk tunes in the process.

After the show I was able to speak to all the players individually and talk to them about the trio. According to Luis Guerra, the bands approach "is all about the compositions and the group dynamics." When I mentioned that the band does not always use the standard order of solos (piano/ bass/ drums), he replied, "We don't want to sound to formulaic. We make it sound new, and we have enough arrangements to keep it moving. That's what keeps us inspired... otherwise, what's the point?" Adds band leader Diego, "It's like a painter with a canvas with four sides... he can do what he wants in the frame. Together we are making music and colors and inspiring each other. We form the song in that canvas, and within that you can do whatever you want. But the melody is first---cord changes second!" Diego added with a wry smile, "I play to the melody."

John said that after playing about three years together there's "a deep trust and admirations for each other as human beings". He added that the band was not locked into the clichés of "jazz standards". "There's so many creative places we can go in the moment" he concluded, and after hearing the trio for myself, I'd have to agree. I felt we had all gone on a musical journey together, and someone had thrown away the map.