

The originality of Iyer's work can call to mind such brilliantly off-center predecessors as Andrew Hill and Herbie Nichols, and one of the set's (and the album's) covers was a supple read of Nichols' "Wildflower," an engagingly dissonant swirl of tradition and modernism. Crump took a dark, bluesy solo early on, and Gilmore got one later on as well.

Two pop covers from *Accelerando* were similarly sophisticated and pleasing. One of them, the Michael Jackson-associated "Human Nature," Iyer had already recorded alone for his recent album *Solo*. So had Miles Davis, on his 1985 album *You're Under Arrest*, a late-career example of Davis' nose for charming, improvisation-worthy melodies. But Davis used the tune more as a simple, recognizable break from the funk he was emphasizing then; in the hands of Iyer

and his trio, "Human Nature" is much artier and more stretched out. Iyer splintered the melody in places before doubling back to it, Gilmore's drumming sizzled exquisitely, and the tune ended with Crump bowing the familiar melody along with Iyer's piano.

For all that, the revelation of the evening may have been the trio's robust, emphatic take on "The Star of a Story," a tune recorded in the late '70s by the disco group Heatwave. It revealed Iyer's own shrewd eye for improbable jazz covers. (Also his apparent affection for the music of Michael Jackson. Iyer told the audience that "The Star of a Story" had been written by the author of Jackson's hit "Thriller," Rod Temperton.) Like much of what preceded it that night, "The Star of a Story" was modern jazz at its most sophisticated, taking on pop music without pandering.

West to East

L.A.-BASED BENNIE MAUPIN AND ENSEMBLE BRING A SENSE OF TOTALITY TO BOHEMIAN CAVERNS

by Evan Haga

Bennie Maupin is a musician with a selling point about as strong as they come in jazz. The woodwinds player participated in some of the most important jazz-rock sessions of the style's late '60s and '70s heyday—among them Miles' *Bitches Brew*, Jack Johnson, *On the Corner* and *Big Fun*, and, as part of Herbie Hancock's groundbreaking jazz-funk outfits, *Mwandishi*, *Head Hunters* and *Thrust*. "A tribute to this," "the anniversary of that": It's the sort of living-history legacy promoters drool over.

But, by and large, that isn't the legacy Maupin, 71, chooses to honor with his working band. During the late set at Washington, D.C.'s Bohemian Caverns on Nov. 18, Maupin and his Ensemble—bassist Darek Oles, drummer Michael Stephens and percussionist Munyungo Jackson—paid homage to the excellent music he's been writing over the past decade, compositions recorded by the aforementioned players as well as the young Polish musicians who appeared on 2008's acclaimed *Early Reflections*. This music upholds some of the modal, vamping ideals of Maupin's '60s and '70s work, but doesn't rehash that aesthetic; it's ultimately more directly melodic, more formal, more contemplative and more chamberlike. And a couple of standards among the originals gave the set a striking sense of totality.

The instrumentation, essentially an augmented strolling trio, exploited all the assets of the format, especially the wide-open harmonic space that accommodated

lengthy improvisations on a variety of material. Monk's "I Mean You" opened the set, Maupin blowing like Prestige-era Trane making his way toward the Classic Quartet: hard-bop tenor force, thematic phrasing and some—but not too much—use of extended techniques.

Then came, with the leader switching to bass clarinet, "Escondido" off *Early Reflections*, a sly, noir-ish groover with descending figures similar to those of Ennio Morricone's theme to *The Sicilian Clan*.

The set proceeded with more engaging diversity: a quietly searching spiritual-jazz exploration, "Walter Bishop Jr.," a beautiful ballad, "My One and Only Love," delivered on tenor; and Maupin taking over the piano with drifting, melancholic, ECM-ish melody elsewhere. "Penumbra," the title track off the Ensemble's 2006 disc, found Maupin blowing alto flute atop subtle world rhythms, the whole thing worthy of Impulse! Ditto the

closer, "Prophet's Motifs," which Maupin opened with a chromatic theme on bass clarinet before coaching his sidemen into a danceable, unabashedly funky exercise. After so much meditative restraint, it felt necessarily cathartic. **JT**



▲ Bennie Maupin (center), with Munyungo Jackson, Darek Oles and Michael Stephens (from left)

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