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Scene and Heard

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Regina Spektor

Electric Factory — Mar 24, 2005

Children frolicked like elves through the forest of adults, who had to march Ent-like to the bar in the adjacent room for liquid refreshment. This all-ages show was an intimate performance by the anti-folk artist, whose previous Philly appearances were in a support capacity (most recently for the Dresden Dolls). Headlining a show outside of New York City gave Spektor some jitters. However, through her missteps and false starts, the audience was putty in her hands. Dressed in a crinoline skirt, she flashed a disarming smile and extolled the virtues and necessity of practicing three hours a day, "I wrote it, I thought I'd remember it." Few artists could get away with this kind of performance. Eager to lend a hand, crowd members prompted her with chord names and lyrics whenever she became stumped. Spektor was visibly pleased that people knew her songs well enough to help out, and jokingly assigned blame to the fan who requested the song she was botching. To her credit, her songs include some pretty intricate keyboard work. Watching and listening to an artist rehearse has never been so much fun, and the mistakes were as much a part of her kitsch as the guttural utterances.

—Jesse Delaney

Vinson Valega Trio

Zanzibar Blue — Mar 17, 2005

Drummer Vinson Valega is all about communication, both on the bandstand, through his airy, conversational trio, and off, with his website, www.cslproductions.com. Equal parts promotional tool, lefty blog and new-agey consciousness-raiser, the site professes a desire to "extend the dialogue found between musician and listener into the realm of our everyday lives." That drive was in evidence throughout the trio's second set Thursday night, despite the continuous exodus of St. Patty's day revelers for greener (and cheaper) pastures. Case in point: set opener "Giant Steps," Coltrane's standard. After the standard head and a skillful alto solo from Anton Denner, things took a turn for the interactive as bassist Gary Wang and Valega locked eyes and settled into a groove. Valega's drumming continually evolves, steady rhythmically but given to frequent tonal shifts which create new environments which his bandmates respond to with snap reflexes. As Denner re-entered "Steps," the melody was deconstructed and passed between the altoist and Wang, with the leader constantly shifting the prism through which the soloists passed. The approach works on standards (the set also featured the trio's take on "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes") as well as their own witty originals.

—Shaun Brady

Steven Bernstein

Painted Bride — Mar 5, 2005

"Music is my religion," Steven Bernstein announced before playing a single note, admitting that he rarely goes to temple before a crowd that skewed older and more Jewish than your average jazz show. The occasion was the first-ever US performance of music from the *Diaspora Blues* CD, interpretations of cantorial melodies by chazzan Moshe Koussevitzky. That irreverence was evidenced in the interpretations; on at least one occasion, Bernstein confessed, the original melody was "way, way down where you couldn't even hear it." Supplementing his guests from the CD, Sam Rivers' trio, with pianist Uri Caine and surprise additions Marty Ehrlich (clarinet, alto flute) and Vincent Chancey (French horn), Bernstein was obviously enjoying the chance to expand his conception of the music, occasionally turning to watch the band with an ear-to-ear grin. The best and, well, only slide trumpeter on the NY downtown scene was wise enough to take advantage of the Rivers trio's multi-instrumental ability to perform two stellar all-horn numbers. Regardless of denomination, this was a powerful call to prayer.

—Shaun Brady



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Terrence Blanchard

Zellerbach Theatre — Mar 4, 2005

The holy shit moment came at the outset of the sextet's third tune. The first two numbers had been solid post-bop performed by Terence Blanchard's new, and immensely talented, band. But then, after a speech where the leader extolled the virtues of the young musicians, he turned the stage over to his guitarist, Benin native Lionel Loueke. Already having impressed with his cooler-than-Rick-Nielsen axe, a Yamaha with its body merely suggested by the outline of its frame, Loueke picked up a more traditional Les Paul-style and began to produce very un-guitar-like sounds. He drummed the body with his fingers, raked the strings and strummed past the bridge, generating alien noises with his effects pedals, then broke out in an occasional chant in his native language. It was like seeing the bastard child of Derek Bailey and Ali Farka Toure, and it reduced the audience to speechlessness. This night could turn out to be one of those I-saw-him-when stories if Loueke fulfills the potential he showed on the Zellerbach stage.

—Shaun Brady

Lovers Rock

Metro Lounge — Feb 11, 2005

Can somebody explain to me what the fuck happened here? Was this a joke? Eight dollar stolis? A bunch of fucking swingers sitting at the bar, turning their heads whenever more people walk through the door? Hurrydate assholes telling me I should do Hurrydate because "there's a girl at the bar who used to skateboard and now she's a grad student I think you guys would hit it off in four minutes hey hey hey," ostensibly a good match because (a) I'm wearing a sweatshirt and (b) also wearing glasses? Dudes wearing khakis and rolling up their undershirts? Girls with the same fucking lean-back two-step for Joy Division and the fucking Percolator? By far the worst DJ sets evah? Come the fuck on, you have everybody on the floor for "Deceptacon" and then you blow it with fucking what was it? Same thing happens twenty minutes later when everybody's psyched for "Galang" and then you drop, what the fuck was that, a Toni Braxton reggaeton remix? Did Nick or Dave even show up for this? Do you realize that the highlight of the party was that a girl who had a shirt that looked exactly like the cover of Ricardo Villalobos' *The Au Harem D'archimede*? And she kept dancing so it looked like it was this album, dancing? Eight dollar stolis?

—Nick Sylvester

Mirah

Rotunda — Feb 9, 2005

If the K Records thing ever goes stale, it's good to know Mirah has a couple backup outlets at her disposal. For one, there's Klezmer. Headlining a benefit show for the University City-based Jewish Dialogue group, the nomadic/ex-local chanteuse seemed positively floored by the more traditional-sounding band who opened. Featuring Rachel Lemisch and Jason Rosenblatt of contempo-klezmer group Shtreiml, as well as violinist Ilana Sherer, the one-off trio who simply called themselves The Klezmers used their cheery beats and trombone bleats to get Yiddish folk dancing in the wings. "Okay, let's be honest here," a duly impressed Mirah said during her own set. "Indie rock gets boring after a while, so it's great to play with bands like this." Initially calling for a full-on Klezmers vs. Mirah mash up, she settled for backup harmonica from Rosenblatt upon learning the group had already packed up its instruments. Still, his mournful gypsy sound nuanced "The Dogs of B.A." to the point of chills. After closing her main set with the local/seasonal favorite "Gone Sugaring," the crowd learned Mirah's other backup prospect: karaoke queen. Ignoring cries for "Person Person Person" and "Jerusalem," she asked the 300-some people packed in the Rotunda to suggest a song everybody knew the words to, not necessarily one of her own. A confused rumbling stirred in the room until somebody shouted out "Like A Prayer." Then the crowd cheered and the atonal sing-screaming began. Mirah gleefully pulled some pantomime dance moves with a backup volunteer plucked from the floor, though it fast became apparent that, neither singer nor crowd really knew Madonna's words much beyond the chorus.

—John Vettese