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A Weekend of Jazz Masters at Keystone Korner

By Michael B. Friedman

The weekend of October 7th, 2024 was historic. Two NEA jazz masters- Hubert Laws on flute and Gary Bartz on sax-appeared at Keystone Korner one night after another. Spectacular performances by 84-year-old men who have been important figures in jazz in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Notably, each of them attended Juilliard at roughly the same time in the late 1950s and early '60s. And each of them played with major figures at that time. Gary Bartz with Art Blakey and others. Hubert Laws with Chick Corea and others. Bartz went on to play with Miles Davis's fusion group, McCoy Tyner and many more. Hubert Laws played both classical and jazz early on and worked with Mongo Santamaria and Chet Baker among many others. Along the way Bartz won two Grammys. Laws has also had two Grammy awards.

Laws brought a very tight quartet to Keystone Korner to begin this remarkable weekend. It was his first ever appearance in Baltimore. His group included David Budway on piano, Jeff Grubbs on bass and Adam Cruz on drums. These are all players of remarkable technical ability. Grubbs, for example, also plays with the Pittsburgh Symphony. I was especially blown away by Budway, whose extraordinary technique carried the music forward rather than subjugating it. And I was extremely impressed by the melodic playing of the bass player and the drummer, who did far more than provide rhythm.

Of course, Laws's flute playing was, as always, flawless, inventive, and totally connected to his group. In remembrance of Chick Corea, they opened with a lovely and original arrangement of "Windows". That set also included a magnificent performance of "Dat Dere" by Bobby Timmons, a favorite of mine. David Budway's solo was beyond belief. The set concluded with a great surprise-the adagio movement of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto.

A special treat was the appearance of two flutists based in Baltimore who are themselves players of remarkable ability-Delandria Mills and Andrea Brachfeld. Both were clearly thrilled to be playing with Laws, and they played

exceedingly well. Brachfeld was particularly impressive on a very fast rendition of "Airegin", which Laws called as a surprise and challenge to her. She more than met it. What a Friday night!

Bartz, who is a native of Baltimore, brought a quintet on Saturday and Sunday that included Marc Cary on piano, Paul Bollenback on guitar, James King on bass, and Kassa Overall on drums. All of them are master musicians at home in many styles. That's essential because Bartz's music is a unique amalgam of straight ahead jazz, rhythm and blues, hard bop, free jazz, African chants and even some smooth jazz.

Bartz has said "Music is my religion," a theme developed first in his album *Music Is My Sanctuary* and reflected in his performance at Keystone Korner of "The Creator Has A Master Plan," which was composed by Pharoah Sanders, with whom Bartz worked from time to time from 1969 until Sanders's death in 2022.

The set that I heard at Keystone opened with a bebop piece very reminiscent of Charlie Parker. It continued with various forms of modern jazz reminiscent of Miles Davis and others. There was a strong piece based on rhythm changes and a short cacophonous, pulseless interlude of free jazz. The set concluded with a piece that had roots in jazz and religious music, illustrating Bartz's sense of the relationship of music and the divine, of the transcendental potential of music. Despite its complexity and religious solemnity, Bartz's music swings. It evokes your inner rhythm. It is not music to sit still to.

Hubert Laws and Gary Bartz, two of the masters of jazz, made this a weekend to remember. Hopefully, they'll be back.