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Eric Kennedy's Tribute To His Wife and To Love

By Michael B. Friedman

Eric Kennedy is one of Baltimore's most in-demand drummers and for good reason. As Andrea Brachfeld- a superb jazz flautist-put it, "Eric is a great drummer because he listens acutely to support the musicians he works with. This sensitivity sets him apart and above most drummers I've personally ever played with."

This was on display at Keystone Korner on September 19 at his appearance leading quintet in a tribute to his late wife, Lisa Weems, and to the power of love. It was a rare opportunity to hear him as a leader and, to my great surprise, as a vocalist.

The quintet he gathered for this occasion included Marc Carey, on piano, Kelly Shepherd on sax, John Lee on guitar, and Curtis Lundy on bass, all players with long histories of playing with major jazz musicians.

The musical sound varied, allowing Kennedy to use the full range of his extraordinary technical skills. The first show opened with a pulseless piece called "Child of God" that could have been part of a post-modern classical concert. But that was just for openers. The show also included fast, swinging modern jazz; blues that was true to its roots; and heartfelt ballads such as "Sky1ark".

Kennedy's vocals were the big surprise to me. Like master jazz musicians who sing occasionally, his vocals were not demonstrations of vocal ability but of insight into the music and into the theme of love. I wasn't able to stay for the second show, but my friend Liz Fixsen was there and shared with me how moved she was by Kennedy's songs expressing his love for his late wife Lisa and his daughter Salome.

His voice, like his drumming, supported the music. That's the thing about Kennedy's playing. It is not showy. It is egoless. It is always a conversation with the musicians he's working with. And that is why he is always worth listening to.