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Dan Tepfer Plays Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola With Seasoned Elders in Tow

By NATE CHINEN | SEPTEMBER 10, 2015

After putting the finishing touch on a delicate, rapturous ballad at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola on Wednesday night, the pianist Dan Tepfer reflected on his present circumstance. He was leading a trio with musicians more than 40 years his senior: the drummer Billy Hart, 74, and the bassist Gary Peacock, 80. Working in such company, "I'm constantly reminded of the amazing people they've played with over the years," Mr. Tepfer said.

As a case in point, the song they had just played — "Time Remembered," an impressionistic gem by the pianist Bill Evans — was a staple during Mr. Peacock's noted tenure in the Bill Evans Trio, half a century ago. "So think about that," Mr. Tepfer instructed, before moving on.



Dan Tepfer on Wednesday at Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, by Michelle V. Agins

Mr. Tepfer, Mr. Peacock and Mr. Hart were appearing together under the auspices of the Coca-Cola Generations in Jazz Festival, an annual affair, six years running, presented by Jazz at Lincoln Center. The monthlong club series rests on an idea that couldn't be simpler or more obvious. That isn't meant as a complaint.

Jazz musicians collaborate across generations as a matter of course; it's one way the art form self-perpetuates, and typically a good idea even when mentorship isn't the goal. Mr. Tepfer, 33, has made more of this practice than most, notably in a well-traveled duo with the alto saxophonist Lee Konitz. And he had worked with Mr. Peacock and Mr. Hart before Wednesday, but never altogether, as a trio.

Any concern that Mr. Tepfer would be too deferential to his partners, or somehow cowed by precedent, fell away within the first 15 minutes of the early set. He opened with the standard "I'll Remember April," making it a three-way conversation with a gliding undertow. Mr. Peacock answered Mr. Tepfer's chirping phrases with his own nimble annotations, and Mr. Hart provided an earthy fulcrum, alert and assured.

Much of the set consisted of music composed by or for Mr. Peacock, including two Tepfer originals: "Road Runner," a propulsive churning, and "For It," a shadowy waltz. "Vignette," which Mr. Peacock recorded for ECM in the 1970s, and again on an album released this year, yielded one of the set's high points, with a melancholy mystique that Mr. Tepfer carefully preserved in his solo.

As a pianist, he combines superb technique with a complex set of impulses: he's a deeply rational improviser drawn to the unknown. It's no accident that his most acclaimed project has been "Goldberg Variations/Variations," a bifurcated take on Bach's landmark piano work, played with both pristine fidelity and whimsical license.

Likewise, it was no fluke that "Moor," another vintage piece by Mr. Peacock, elicited Mr. Tepfer's loosest extemporizations, along with some of the most expressive playing by Mr. Hart. There was no need to point out that Mr. Peacock semi-famously recorded the tune with Paul Bley — just as it was unnecessary to note his extensive history with Keith Jarrett as a preamble to "I Loves You Porgy," the Gershwin tune. Mr. Tepfer played the song beautifully, relaxed and focused, sounding as if he had nothing to prove.