Kenny Werner Trio stretches limits of 3-piece band

KENNY WERNER TRIO
Regattabar. Feb. 2.

By Dave Fox
STAFF REPORTER

The Kenny Werner Trio brought its trio to Cambridge's Regattabar Tuesday evening as part of the club's jazz festival. The trio presented two 90-minute sets of very interesting modern jazz. Werner is no stranger to the Boston area, having studied at the Berklee College of Music in the 1970s. His current trio lineup is a very well thought out unit, showing the results of ten years of playing together.

The standard trio of piano, bass, and drums is perhaps the most elementary of jazz instrumentalations, with many recorded examples. This trio tries to be especially creative in order to produce fresh music, and the Kenny Werner Trio succeeds admirably in this respect. Werner himself is a very talented improviser, showing a well-developed keyboard technique and innovative chord voicings. Ratzo Harris (whom I had the pleasure of meeting in India on an early January) is a fine upright bass player. Werner also presents a very well thought out bass line and playing solos that take the instrument in new directions. Drummer Tom Rainey is equally gifted at providing thoughtful drum lines. These three men display an on-stage chemistry that allows them to creatively interpret both standards and Werner's own compositions to produce a very modern sound. The evening began with Werner's composition "Chick." This piece started in a subdued fashion, with Harris backing up Werner's piano introduction. Then, Harris began to play only his cymbals to add a sort of rhythm "mood enhancement" effect rather than a traditional groove. Harris, playing an electric-acoustic six-string vertical bass, offered a considerable interpretation of the melody, and a beautiful solo in the high range of the instrument. Werner then took over the solo, and presented a nice solo. The overall feel of the piece gradually intensified, resulting in a climactic finish.

The third piece, "Jackson 5," was dedicated to pianist Jacky Piasecki. The signature of this tune was a change of the tempo, as the time continually shifted from that of a fast bebop feel to a very easy groove, to double time, etc. Harris played the melody on the bass for a good deal of the tune, and then played a solo during one of the first sections that I can only describe as demonic. The speed and accuracy he displayed in this solo were far beyond what is normally the standard for upright bass playing, making a new statement with the instrument. Rainey offered a drum solo marked with an excellent variability of dynamics and precision cymbal muting. Werner presented a nice solo to end the piece. It was truly a thought-provoking and innovative piece.

The final piece of the set was in high-light. It began with a very prominent "ostinato" bass line, with lively drums to establish a good groove. Werner improvised over the groove, and there was an abrupt time change, to an easy groove with a similar "ostinato" line. In this section, Werner presented a magnificent solo in which he displayed all of his skills. This solo grew in complexity and intensity, to a majestic climax. After this solo, the rhythmic feel of the beginning was re-established with the return of the prominent bass line. There was another time change, to a quick tempo, to a fast section that Harris presented another wonderful bass solo, with much use of bass chords and sliding multiple stops. After this solo, the tune was re-established, and Rainey presented a truly outstanding drum solo. He used every available feature of his drum kit, including the rims, to produce interesting sounds. The solo was marked by good use of varying dynamics of the range of the piano, including very "mood enhanced" sounding low notes. Harris and Rainey came in, providing rhythmic contrasts between Harris's groove-oriented bass line and Rainey's prominent tom-tom drumming (with no snare). The sound intensified, with great coordination between Rainey's cymbals, and the piano and bass. Harris presented an excellent solo featuring some extraordinarily high notes. After this solo, the sound became less intense, while Harris played a great wrist echolocation solo, with complex rhythm. Harris provided a back-ground for Rainey to play a rather uninhibited, "violent" drum solo. He displayed his great wrist control, and the music had an intensity and power that was an excellent way to end the evening.

The Kenny Werner Trio showed itself to be at its best during their magnificent jazz trio scene. It certainly deserves wider recognition, which may come with the release of the next album (Werner joked that the band's latest album, "Press Enter," was available at "at least four record stores"). Also, Ratzo Harris deserves wider recognition. Look for this trio, and its next album which should prove to be excellent, to achieve national acclaim sometime soon.

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