Avant-garde jazz band is highlight of Boston scene

ETHER/ORCHESTRA
Johnny D’s.

By Dave Fox
STAFF REPORTER

One of the advantages of life in Boston is the active musical scene. Boston is perhaps second only to New York as a hotbed of cutting-edge jazz performance. On Wednesday night, one of Boston’s premier jazz groups, the Either/Orchestra, held up this tradition with a pair of sets at Johnny D’s in Somerville.

The 10-man Orchestra, led by saxophonist Russ Gershon, consists of keys, bass, drums, and an incredible seven-piece horn section (2 trumpets/fluegelhorns, 2 trombonists, and three reed men). Their sound emphasizes the avant-garde, and represents an eclectic mix of free jazz and inventive arranging. The large horn section provides the Orchestra with an extensive tonal palette that their arrangements exploit to the fullest degree. Wednesday night’s performance was a showcase for the Orchestra’s unique sound.

I arrived near the end of the first set. The Orchestra was going full-tilt, playing a piece that was reminiscent of a New Orleans funeral procession. The tempo alternated from slow to fast and vice versa. During a slow portion, Charlie Kohlhase offered a baritone sax solo that emphasized the full, “fat” tone of the big horn, giving the piece a certain authority. As the solo increased in intensity, the rest of the horns laid down a lush background, and the horns reached a climax, dissolving into an upbeat vamp to end the piece.

The next tune began with a bass groove in a sort of Calypso fashion. The horns fashioned a nice line over the groove, leading to a nice trumpet solo by John Carlson. This was followed by a trombone solo, precisely executed by Dan Fox (no relation!). A drum solo by Matt Wilson was the highlight of the piece, as he used a stick and one hand on a timbale to drive the energy of the piece to a frenzy. After this, the music resolved to a vamp, over which Gershon introduced the band (with much humor). The band then took a short break.

To open the second set, the Orchestra played a tune called “Premonitions.” This opened with a sort of laid-back, “cool” groove. The horns wove another intricate theme over the groove. The alto player was playing a bass clarinet, which helped give the horns a deep, rich sound (along with the baritone sax and the trombones). Tom Halter played a beautiful flute/horn solo, during which he used the lower register of the horn to great effect. This was followed by a (digable) piano solo, and a clean soprano sax solo by Gershon. This led to a nice restatement of the original theme to end the piece.

The next piece, “The Half-Life of Desire” (from their album of the same name), featured Kohlhase on alto sax. He laid down an expressive interpretation of the melody, with the other horns providing a nice background. The meter of the piece was altered, and then Kohlhase delivered a dazzling alto solo. His playing was unrelenting, as he mined his horn for many interesting sounds in very inventive sequences. He also hit some alessimo notes that seemed to be almost in the stratosphere! As the solo intensified, the horns similarly intensified their playing. The piece ended as Kohlhase finally wound down.

Next was a very interesting cover of McCoy Tyner’s “Vision.” The arrangement used the full horn section to deliver the melody, almost fanfare style. The alto player performed a solo that started rather conventionally, but soon stretched the limits, as it became rather atonal. The energy level of the solo soon grew to very frantic, and as the solo finally wound down, Kohlhase took over the spotlight and played a bar sax solo. Somewhere in the midst of all this, the feel of the piece changed from structured to free. During Kohlhase’s solo, Gershon directed the other horns in some “random” coloration effects, such as low-pitched shakes, “train-whistle” doppler effects, etc. This was very effective, as Kohlhase manipulated his horn to produce ever stranger effects. After an energetic climax, the bass laid down a staccato, “sequence” sort of groove, to which the keyboard player added some colorations. This led to a restatement of the opening theme, to close the piece. Overall, this tune was quite thought-provoking.

Perhaps the highlight of the set was the Orchestra’s performance of John Tchac’s appropriately named “Don’t Lose Your Way.” This featured the trombones playing a very fast vamp that soon obscured the individuals (i.e., repeated rhythmic unison) of the piece (as Tchac obviously intended). Over this, the rest of the horns played a similarly complex line which somehow melded with the trombone vamp. As the (audience’s) confusion grew, the horns backed off, and the trombones re-asserted their vamp line. Gershon then offered a nice tenor solo, during which (at times) the remaining horns added coloration over the vamp, as directed by Halter. This very extraordinary piece then resolved into an anti-climactic ending.

To conclude the evening, the Orchestra performed Kohlhase’s “The New Llama Walk.” This had a somewhat conventional groove-in-four feel, and featured some nice horn lines with counterpoint supplied by the trombones and bar sax. Interestingly “dulcizing” trumpet solos were offered, followed by “dulcizing” trombone solos, with each player wielding a plumber’s helper. This lead to a restatement of the opening melody to close the piece.

The sound of the Either/Orchestra, like that of other avant-garde groups, almost defies description. Their ability to keep several musical lines going in different directions to produce a cohesive whole is remarkable, and the sight of seven horn players arrayed across the stage is quite impressive. The members of Either/Orchestra are involved in many side projects, which offer many opportunities to hear these talented musicians in various settings. Gershon indicated that the Orchestra will next perform in Boston on Dec. 9 at an as yet unnamed club, so keep your schedule clear! These guys are a must-see group for Boston jazz fans!