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JAZZMANDU 2011 – FINAL REVIEW

If the measure of how much fun you're having is the speed at which

time seems to fly by, then Surya Nepal Jazzmandu 2011 might well have set some kind of record. Given the manic pace of



The Cuban League

work required to smoothly run a 6-day festival, it shouldn't have been surprising that it all seemed over before we'd had time to blink. Still, for both musicians and organizers who'd seen it all before, this year's festival flew by fast enough to suggest something out of the ordinary. Add to that the delighted crowds that turned up for every event (at Jazz Upstairs there were even people climbing through second floor windows on the night of the Valley Jams)

It all started on the 20th of October with the Jazz for the Next Generation music competition at the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory. Three Kathmandu bands brought their best to the stage before



bconnected

Kathmandu got its first taste of Swiss band bconnected and Swedish boys Neighbourhood. Local band All My Friends emerged as deserving winners with all three members – pianist Abhishek Bhadra, drummer Kiran Shahi, and bassist Ian Eustis – impressing a judging panel of the visiting musicians, many of whom were quick to admit that Kathmandu was the last place they'd expected to find such a promising jazz scene.

Imagine their surprise the next night, then, when Jazzmandu packed three venues full of eager jazz fans for the Valley Jams. Neighbourhood played at the House of Music in Thamel, bconnected played at Moksh in Jhamsikhel, and The Cuban League entertained Jazz Upstairs in Lazimpat. In these small venues Kathmandu



The horn section of Neighbourhood

saw jazz as it is best seen: through the smoky air of a dark bar, conversations in twelve different languages drowned out by the band, and the bartender barely able to keep up with the orders. There was music, there were good people, there was dancing, and it all made a glorious noise.

The next morning dawned bright and beautiful, and Jazzmandu escaped the city to Gokarna Forest Resort. Under the canopy of giant trees and to the buzz of forest cicadas, Jazzmandu put on a marathon show. Visiting musicians got a sample of diverse local sounds with folk tunes from

Gandharva, Eastern Classical music from the Robin Lal Trio, seminal Nepali jazz band the Cadenza Collective, and the return of the boys from All My Friends. Adding to the global sound were Neighbourhood, the Cuban League, bconnected, Mumbai band



Sonu Sangameswaran of Window Seat

Window Seat, and Australian saxophonist Nick Aggs, an old friend who was at the first Jazzmandu back in 2002 and has been back for three more since. Impressive sets from all the bands already had the audience dancing, but when Cuban singer Xiomara Laugart invited all the other bands back onstage for the final jam, the crowd exploded. Onstage the horns blared and the saxophones screamed, fingers raced across the keyboard, and drummers queued for their turn at bashing the cymbals. Offstage the crowd was on its feet, dancing, whistling and chanting, and as soon as someone on stage said the word ‘jump’, they made the earth shake. As the musicians and the crowd fed off each other, the release of energy was irresistible. Even on the last day of the festival, the musicians couldn’t help but smile and nod their heads whenever the Gokarna jam came up in conversation.

And the jam kept going the next night, October 23rd, this time at the Afro-Latin Jam at Hotel Shangri-La. Bassist Yunior Terry and pianist Axel Tosca Laugart of The Cuban League led the way, laying down infectious Latin beats and melodies with the help of bconnected’s ‘Cicco’ Ciccone on

congas as the full complement of Jazzmandu musicians took turns at joining in.

The next night brought jamming of another style at another magnificent venue. In the historical palace courtyard of the Patan Museum, bconnected, Window Seat, Neighbourhood and Cadenza joined Nepali masters Robin Lal, Guru Dev Kamat and Suresh Raj Bajracharya to fuse jazz and Eastern Classical music, with some improvisations based on everything from jazz standards to ragas. The mix of styles at Jazz at Patan was as eclectic as it was absorbing. In one memorable moment, Robin Lal, Daniel ‘Cicco’ Ciccone, and Yoann Julliard seamlessly combined tabla, Latin congas, and jazz drumming in a three-way percussion call-and-response. Such synergy was the rule rather than an exception on the night, and also during the entire festival. Veteran musician Tala Faral, keyboardist and saxophonist for Mumbai outfit Window Seat and a Jazzmandu returnee, put it best: “This year there has been 100% connection between the musicians. It was great.”



Robin Lal Eastern Classical Trio

And it wasn’t just at putting on a superb show that Jazzmandu 2011 succeeded. As always, the festival looked to promote music appreciation and education in Nepal. The band contest gave local musicians a welcome platform to gain exposure and experience, and a public Master Class at the Kathmandu Jazz Conservatory on the

afternoon before Jazz at Patan gave locals the chance to really understand the music, with Neighbourhood playing some original tunes and stopping after each song to answer questions and to explain and demonstrate how each piece was put together. Band contest winners All My Friends were



Edvin Nahlin and Aleks Brdarski of Neighbourhood

especially lucky, receiving an hour of private instruction on their respective instruments with the visiting musicians of their choice. “I wanted to know more about their music because I really like them,” pianist Abhishek Bhadra said about his lesson with Edvin Nahlin of Neighbourhood, “I got new ideas and I feel inspired to use them in our band.”

The Jazzmandu Finale at Hotel Shangri-La on the 25th brought back all the elements



that made the festival such a resounding success. The audience packed the hotel’s lawn as the sun went down, watching the Jazzmandu bands play their sets in a garden illuminated by the dancing flames of fire torches. Backstage musicians from different

bands all mixed together, with easy banter and smiles all around, and everyone was itching to get on stage and jam together one last time. The audience gave them a rousing welcome for the final big jam, and they weren’t disappointed as the music and the ambience recaptured the spirit of the epic first jam at Gokarna.

As things wound down, among the exhausted but jubilant organizers talk turned to next year’s festival, and everyone began asking Navin Chettri, the big musical brain behind Jazzmandu, to build Jazzmandu 2012 around the theme of tens. Tenth anniversary, ten bands, ten days. Navin guaranteed 8 days, but everyone kept pushing for ten. Let’s hope they can change his mind.

Jazzmandu 2011 Reporter
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