

The Latin Side of The Playboy Jazz Festival 2006

A five-star New York salsa Orchestra, an L.A. urban stylistically diverse, politically active, energetic band, and an eight-time Grammy-winning Latin jazz pianist, leading a stellar septet were the Latin side of this year's Playboy Jazz Festival, in its 28th anniversary.

But Latin jazz was also present in the Cos of Good Music set, when its leader and the Festival's emcee Bill Cosby dedicated his band's performance to the recently deceased Nuyorican pianist Hilton Ruiz, while the video screens showed his black-and-white picture. The band featured guest trombonist/conch-shell player Steve Turré. A favorite was his intro to a 6/8 rendition of Miles Davis' "All Blues," in which Turré offered a masterful performance, playing two conch shells at once, in his highly rhythmic style spiced with spirited octave jumps.

Saturday night's headliner was the Grammy-nominated, Billboard-Award-winning Spanish Harlem Orchestra. This unrivalled ensemble honored the musical essence of New York urban Latino culture, by maintaining the Barrio's salsa tradition. With superb arrangements performed in hard-hitting, irresistibly swinging way, the Orchestra had the audience dancing through salsa, cha-cha-chá, and a jazz mambo. Led by pianist/arranger Oscar Hernández (formerly a sideman with Rubén Blades, Celia Cruz, and Tito Puente, among others), the band featured a top-of-the-line musician list: Ray De La Paz, Marco Bermudez (vocalists/soneros); Luisito Quintero (timbales); George Delgado (congas); Jorge Gonzalez (bongos); Máximo Rodríguez (baby bass); Mitch Forman (baritone saxophone, flute); John Walsh, Peter Nater (trumpets); Jimmy Bosch, Luis Bonilla (trombones).

Sunday afternoon, following the exciting McCoy Tyner Trio set, which featured Lula Washington's contemporary jazz/African dance troupe, the Hollywood Bowl's band shell turned, revealing only musical instruments. Drummers and horn players emerged from the crowd, performing a merengue batukada, causing uproar while descending through the bleachers, box-seats area, and onto the stage. Ozomatli's third Playboy Jazz Festival appearance was, once again, the life of the party. Known for its eclecticism, the band concocted cumbia with rock and rap, rap with funk and urban rock, rock with Moroccan melodies, Moorish lines with cumbia,

and samba with reggae. Ozomatli's lyrics and raps, as always, made the band's political standpoint. As of the inclusion of North-African musical ingredients, vocalist/trumpeter Asdrú Sierra said, "September 11 really pushed us to delve into Arab music. For us, music is a language far more universal than politics."

The set finished with a 2/4 Mexican corrido, which morphed into a turntable funk rap, and ended as a 3/4 ranchera.

And when the band shell turned again, pianist extraordinaire Eddie Palmieri's dark, dissonant, and groovin' montunos played the intro to a mambo jazz version of Monk's "In Walked Bud." The Harlem-born pianist and his septet created the typical Palmierian mood, with repeating altered-chord montunos, high-quality music, and captivating, entrancing rhythms. Tenor saxophonist David Sanchez walked in for a cha - cha - with - an - Afro - beat rendition of Dizzy Gillespie's "Tin Tin Deo." Violinist Regina Carter joined the band for a jazz mambo.

Each of Palmieri's band members is a proficient innovator with a brilliant career: Brian Lynch (trumpet); Donald Harrison (alto saxophone); Conrad Herwig (trombone); Joe Santiago (bass); Horacio "El Negro" Hernández (drums); Giovanni Hidalgo (congas). A current venture is the Brian Lynch/Eddie Palmieri Project, and the release "Simpatico," a Latin jazz/salsa/straight-ahead jazz recording available through www.artistshare.com.

The set ended with the lively mambo "E.P. Blues," leaving the audience hungry for more.

As the festival's executive producer Hugh Hefner put it, "Good music is what it's all about."

Patricia Albela