

PANDEMONIUM

(Cadence Jazz)

by David Dupont

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Barry Wallenstein's Pandemonium is in the tradition of jazz poetry. The mix of free verse spawned in the post-WWIII years with the jazz of the time seems so natural; it's surprising more wasn't done with it. Both possess loose, spontaneous rhythms, and a sense of the drama and comedy of the moment. Yet jazz and poetry has always been a sidelight, fading from view until the occasional set like this one arrives to remind listeners of its promise. Maybe hip-hop hybrids will thrust the word-music into the forefront. It has that promise, but we'll have to see.

Pandemonium is beat, not rap. Wallenstein's verse has a broad range of reference, and a loose foot. He weighs in on the beauties of nature and the lure of detective tales. On the opener "Blues Again" his voice seems on the verge of song. While he touches on the language of the blues, he keeps it personal, his sadness more sweetly resigned without any flashes of anger. He lies in his bed, "sweating blue bullets/ a splatter to the skull-as in paintball." He evokes a standard blues trope again in "Days of the Week". As he moves through the week-"Wednesday/ follows like an athlete into his stride"-he arrives at Friday "where the eagles fly". This poem is Wallenstein at his best, whimsical, with just a touch of pathos. Only on "Insinuation/Crime" does he lapse into the kind of hipsterism that undermines so many jazz-poetry matings, and with the band's sashaying late-night groove, the track is still diverting enough. Otherwise, Wallenstein is earnest, self-effacing, and more than a touch sentimental. In his evocation of W.B. Yeats, he even adopts a simple rhythm structure.

He reads his verse in an unassuming-and just a touch husky-baritone over the backgrounds fashioned by a small ensemble. The recital is billed as a collaboration so I assume the music was created with the poet and players consulting on what may fit the particular words. Pianist John Hicks is the central player, able to react to the words whether melancholy as on "Ballad" or busting with energy as on "Drinking" where he delivers some sprightly stride. Each player gets a chance to step forward at least once. Daniel Carter has some bluesy alto spots on several tracks. Bassist Curtis Lundy unrolls a thick satin ribbon of sound under "Lorelei". French hornist Vincent Chancey responds playfully to the jabbing lines of "Bigs & Littles", shifting from open horn to muting it with his hand. Serge Pesce's guitare accommodee, the guitar equivalent of prepared piano, offers striking accompaniment to another of Wallenstein's best poems, "Job 2008", a dystopic vision. More hopeful is his "Prayer", in which he declares his surrender to nature with all its difficulties; "... if there's a storm, let it come down", he concludes. That sense of resignation, not defeatism, marks this distinctive, yet modest session.