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The sound of music



THE HINDU

CHENNAI: 16/01/2010: Vocalist and Guitarist Bernard Sellam and his group of Blues Band, Awek, performing on the occasion of Bonjour India - Festival of France in India, held in Chennai on Saturday. Photo: S_S_Kumar



THE HINDU

CHENNAI : 14/01/2010 : French singer China Moses performing at the Banjour India Festival of France at Taj Coromondel Hotel in Chennai on Thursday. Photo : R_Ravindran.

Music China Moses proved why she is a jazz diva while Awek's brand of blues was replete with emotion

China Moses is a link to a long-forgotten era in jazz - to New York and to the musically-rich 1940s.

At the concert at Taj Coromandel, as part of the Bonjour India Festival of France, with Raphael Lemonnier on the piano, Fabien Marcoz on the double bass, Jean-Pierre Derouard on the drums and Jerome Bach on the sound, China with her sensual singing seemed ready to catch fire, a supernova of talent and energy.

From China to Washington

But, China morphed into a jazz diva only in the evening.

She spent the afternoon in her long skirt and tight braids speaking of her mother, acclaimed jazz vocalist Dee Dee Bridgewater, her love for the queen of the blues, Dinah Washington, her sassiness and song, and how China found Lemonnier to further the romance and seal it with the album 'Gardenias for Dinah'.

“Dinah died at 39, but her repertoire of music was as colourful as her short life (Dinah had 16 mink coats, seven husbands and a couple of lovers). When I discovered that Raphael loved Dinah too, we had to do this tribute,” said China.

So, it was this heritage that the quartet chose to highlight that evening.

In high heels, a little black dress and a voice that could whisper through a pinhole and scat through a megaphone, China shimmied and sang 'Mad about a boy', 'Is you or is you ain't my baby' and the popular torch song 'Cry me a river,' which Yuvan Shankar Raja, the chief guest, said was the finest rendition he had heard.

The concert was a sprinkling of humorous anecdotes from Dinah's life, which China, who is an MTV host, delivered with panache, Raphael's sophisticated pianism, Jean-Pierre's fondness for variations of the tango blended with Afro-Caribbean flavours, all seasoned by Fabien's infinite range of strumming arrangements.

The verbal accounts captured the moods of the songs such as 'Dinah's Blues', 'Fine Fat Daddy', 'Resolution Blues' and 'Evil Gal Blues'.

Listening to China regale the audience was like looking at sepia-tinted photographs of the American South and noticing the nuances that gave jazz its character in its heyday.

Liberating music

The pace slowed for Dinah's Grammy-winning and everyone's all-time favourite 'What a difference a day makes'.

With an unquenchable life force, China sang the ballad, seemingly amused and delighted by the power of desire.

Her timing was perfect, whether landing compellingly on a note or making it whirl with tenderness.

The quartet's music was liberating, taking us beyond barriers, of time and genre, jazz and blues, or even — when China drifted into scat — language. That timelessness, like Dinah's magic, will never fade.

True blues

The concert by Awek, the blues band, at the Sheraton Park Hotel was crowded with improvisation and emotion. Their brand of blues had its own emotional tincture; it was lively and amusing, charged with pulse-kicking and turbulent sound.

Everything in the hall reverberated and tinkled to Awek's energetic performance — the chandeliers, the champagne flutes, the chaise lounge and the people.

Loud and rollicking, the fluid textures that rippled out from Bernard Sellam's guitar, coupled with his gravelly voice, dropped the audience in the heart of Mississippi, in the land of the Delta blues.

Joel Ferron on the bass guitar calmed the turbulence with his poised lyricism, while Olivier Trebel on the drums served as the band's grounding wire.

But, it was Stephane Bertolino on the harmonica playing with a sharp wail and whine, swinging between sounding like a freight train, a banshee and a blender all at once, who almost reduced the hall to smoking rubble.

Bernard, the showman

Bernard and Stephane were the mainstay of the evening, singing songs misty on the surface but hard underneath. Bernard combined the sharp plunk of honky-tonk with rhythmic inflections in 'I can't get enough', 'If I see you one more time' and 'I can't tell'.

A complete showman, Bernard swung his guitar over the crowd, hopped on-stage and off and grimaced and grinned through his performance. With his virtuosity, he kept all eyes on him, and his band followed, through his sudden drops, his speedy and slow guitaring and his high vocals cut off mid-song by a rasp.

The band shuffled the blues through various guises — country-style, contemplative and rhythmic blues. Bernard rasped and growled through 'Kiki' and 'I move on' with the solemnity of the tradition he upholds.