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Love notes from the Detroit Jazz Festival

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Steve Wilson plays at the 32nd Annual Detroit Jazz Festival in Hart Plaza, Detroit, Sunday, September 4, 2011. / KATHLEEN GALLIGAN/Detroit Free Press

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Every Detroit Jazz Festival has a defining moment, and the most powerful of the 32nd annual event, which closed Monday in downtown Detroit, came Sunday afternoon: Former Detroiter, trumpeter and gregarious band leader Walt Szymanski gave the downbeat and the reconstituted J.C. Heard Orchestra tore into “Coastin’ with J.C.” the way a lion would take to a piece of red meat. The 15-piece band, a beautifully blended ensemble, rode the riff-based theme into the promised land of swing. The music was a bear hug to the soul in honor of the band’s namesake, the late, legendary drummer who spent his final decades in Detroit.

Yet there was also poignancy in the air at Hart Plaza. An original member of the band and a beloved former member of the Detroit jazz community, saxophonist Scott Peterson, passed away a few weeks ago, and Szymanski explained that the tenor sax standing guard in front of the reed section was Peterson’s horn, a silent requiem for a friend.

Later the band played a precious bolero that Heard wrote for his granddaughter Samantha, whom Szymanski brought onstage so the band could play it directly to her. After he sang the lyrics, eloquently shaded by Russ Miller’s flute obbligato, he gave her a hug and a kiss. This kind of stuff can be embarrassingly treacly, but here it came off as sweet and sincere — a metaphor for Detroit’s love affair with jazz and the musicians who play it.

There was, in fact, a lot of love resonating throughout the festival. One of the things that the free Labor Day weekend event does best — particularly as the programming has sharpened under festival director Terri Pontremoli — is create an arena for the expression of just how meaningful Detroit’s extraordinary jazz legacy is to the city. This music is embedded in our DNA, and the jazz festival keeps reminding us how that when we celebrate jazz, we celebrate ourselves.

Now, some festival highlights:

Best set (outdoor division): Everybody’s favorite sideman, alto saxophonist Steve Wilson, made his local debut as a leader fronting Wilsonian’s Grain, a post-bop quartet that channeled the saxophonist’s best qualities — selflessness, a fresh and well-made take on the tradition, and the ability to reference a broad spectrum of strategies and styles without falling prey to pastiche or sacrificing an original voice. (Sunday, Absopure Pyramid Stage.)

Best set (indoor division): When dangerous weather washed out Saturday night, the Dave Holland Octet set up camp in the bar at the Marriott Hotel at the Renaissance Center. Powered by the great bassist's Middle Earth vamps and drummer Nate Smith's aggressiveness, the ensemble and soloists — especially saxophonists Chris Potter and Antonio Hart — created their own tornado of sound and intensity.

Biggest complaint: Sound bleed between stages at Hart Plaza remained a serious problem, particularly at the Waterfront Stage. I put the issue to some of the finest acoustic scientists in the country, and they could only think of one solution: TURN DOWN THE SOUND AT THE OTHER STAGES!

Best trio: Pianist Vijay Iyer's remarkably simpatico group, with bassist Stephan Crump and the remarkable drummer Marcus Gilmore, created its own rhythmic language of odd meters and puzzle-box discursiveness. (Sunday, Mack Avenue Records Waterfront Stage).

Most promising newcomer: Vibraphonist Warren Wolf, 31, is a standard-bearer of the front rank. His greatest gift is not his striking technique but his ability as a storyteller who breathes humanity and soul into a percussion instrument of cold metal. (Saturday, Waterfront Stage)

Most surprising dips into jazz repertory: The Aaron Diehl Quintet revived Nat Adderley's suite-like "Little Boy with the Sad Eyes," and the Vijay Iyer Trio tackled Henry Threadgill's "Little Pocket-Sized Demons." (Both Sunday, Waterfront Stage)

Biggest disappointment: The weather-forced cancellation of the Saturday night program, including Jason Moran and the Bandwagon. First time in Detroit Jazz Fest history a whole night was lost to Mother Nature.

Best ballad No. 1: Joe Lovano's Us Five Quintet played Charlie Parker's "Yardbird Suite" in rubato time, wandering through the lovely harmonies phrase by phrase. The delirious lyricism of Lovano's tenor saxophone dissolved inside the luxurious wash of rhythm created by drummers Otis Brown and Francisco Mela (Sunday, Carhartt Amphitheatre Stage).

Best ballad No. 2: The 89-year-old harmonic virtuoso Toots Thielemans played a set of almost nothing but ballads with pianist-keyboardist Kenny Werner, from "I Loves You, Porgy" to Brazilian songs by Ivan Lins, all delivered with the clarified purity and expression of musicians who never use two notes when they can say it in one. (Saturday, Waterfront Stage).

Best piano accompaniment (tie): Mike LeDonne's subtle melodic chording helped the hard-bop homecoming by Detroit-born trombonist Curtis Fuller stay in focus. Werner shadowed Thielemans with intuitive bursts of harmonic imagination, spontaneously inventing new ways to get from A to B. (Both Saturday, Waterfront Stage).

Best parade: Before the final blast of rain came, the Sun Ra Arkestra, decked out in bright, spangly ancient-to-the future Egyptian garb, marched to the front of the amphitheatre stage for an abbreviated acoustic set of free blowing and beguiling Sun Ra classics. Messy but fun. (Saturday, Amphitheatre Stage)

Wish I heard more: I only made the last 20 minutes of guitarist Anthony Wilson's organ trio with Larry Goldings on the Hammond B3 and Karriem Riggins on drums. A spacey, abstract groove tune simmered provocatively, while Wilson played "Body and Soul" with the songful phrasing of a vocalist. (Monday, Waterfront Stage)

All groove, all the time: Riggins, the Detroit-born drummer, a rare musician with serious street cred in jazz and hip-hop, brought the Grammy Award-winning rapper Common into the fold. It was a comfortable if unfocused fit. Common's charismatic freestyling burrowed into Detroit lore while Riggins, bassist Bob Hurst and company layed down a slow-boil beat that married hip-hop with '70s-styled funky soul-jazz. When Hurst switched to acoustic bass and the groove made a U-turn into swing, Common stumbled at first but then, like any good musician, found the pocket. (Monday, JPMorgan Chase Main Stage)

The takeaway: This was the most intelligent and satisfying mix of progressive ideas and traditional programming since I started covering the event 15 years ago, although the global theme — "We Give You the World" — proved inconsequential once the music started.