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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



BY [MARK STRYKER](#)

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Alto saxophonist Steve Wilson has played frequently in metro Detroit with everyone from Chick Corea to Maria Schneider. But Sunday night at the 32nd annual Detroit Jazz Festival marked his local debut as a leader.

His post-bop quartet, Wilsonian's Grain, 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. Musicians known for their versatility like Wilson sometimes lack a strong enough point of view to put their own stamp on a group. Or they're so intent on putting a stake in the ground that they force the action.

But Wilson, pianist Orrin Evans, bassist Ugonna Okegwo and Detroit-born drummer Clarence Penn let the music come to them in unpretentious, charismatic fashion at the Pyramid Stage at Hart Plaza. The four players sounded completely comfortable in their own skins. They play what they know, and their best music Sunday showed they know a lot.

Wilson, 50, played with a tart sound that radiated warmth but also the blues. He had a way of phrasing in-the-moment that avoided clichés and kept his agile mind alive to true improvisation rather than paint-by-numbers soloing. The whole group sounded smart but not prone to overly intellectualizing the music, preferring to speak to and from the soul.

On Wilson's arrangement of Thelonious Monk's "Well You Needn't," which used a funky vamp to disguise the beat and played clever tricks with the form, the saxophonist got underneath the skin of the rhythmic displacements in his solo; serpentine phrases cut by sharply articulated riffs told a story. The rhythm section, focused and frisky, fed him

ideas; Wilson and Evans, an unpredictable player, especially seemed to be listening to the same internal song.

Okegwo's precious waltz "For You" found Wilson playing the spare melody in his balcony register with a sound shorn of vibrato and perfectly in tune, capturing the purity of the line. He followed with a solo that downplayed technique for melody. The quartet drew on Ellington, bebop and modal ideas on a lickety-split, swinging version of the standard "Perdido."

A Wilson original inspired by the New York City subway was a nutty, herky-jerky ride, morphing in and out of free time and swing passages at varying tempos. Wilson improvised squiggly melodies that winked at Ornette Coleman. The trio -- Evans' jabbing chords, Okegwo's brawny counterpoint and walk and Penn's rhythmic sparring -- came and went as it pleased. The music sounded both fun to play and fun to listen to: Those are goals and results worth applauding.

The Detroit Jazz Festival continues through 8 p.m. tonight in downtown Detroit at Hart Plaza, Campus Martius and Cadillac Square. Admission is free.