

September 22, 2009

[Connie Crothers Shows Us How It's Done](#)

Tags: [Andrea Wolper](#), [Connie Crothers](#), [Ken Filiano](#)



At a time when hard questions are being asked about its intrinsic worth, Connie Crothers gives jazz education a good name. She's been at it as long as I can remember, and probably for some time before that. She's a player who teaches and a teacher who plays, and she does both so manifestly well as to make the order of priority irrelevant.

Connie doesn't have a sinecure at some university, but instead teaches out of her Brooklyn loft. As distinctive a pianist as she is, she doesn't turn out little carbon copies of herself, or a skein of idiomatic-correct rules-followers. Rather, she mentors genuinely creative artists and helps them to best express themselves in myriad ways. Indeed, Connie's pedagogy doesn't produce disciples so much as peers – and in many cases, creative collaborators. You'd be hard-pressed to find one of her students who doesn't describe her in the most glowing terms.

Connie was invited to curate The Stone in New York for the second half of September. She used the opportunity to showcase not only her own considerable artistry, but also that of some of her gifted students, past and present. They include clarinetist Bill Payne, with whom Connie recently recorded a beautiful album of free improvisations; alto saxophonist Richard Tabnik, who's been plying his idiosyncratic lyricism around New York for years (to a great deal less acclaim than he deserves); saxophonist Nick Lyons, a young improvising alto saxophonist of great promise; and many more. I can't make many of the hits, living as I do a good 60 miles from the nearest subway station. However, I was able to make it into the city this past Sunday to catch two sets – the first a solo concert by pianist Carol Liebowitz, the second featuring TranceFormation, a trio comprising Connie on piano, her former student Andrea Wolper on vocals, and Ken Filiano on bass.

I didn't think to ask Carol Liebowitz whether she's studied with Connie, but I assume she has. **Liebowitz certainly exhibits the kind of free-thinking individuality Connie seems to foster in all her students – in other words, she doesn't sound much like anyone but herself.** Her set consisted of a dozen-or-so short, freely improvised vignettes. She took care to contrast each movement from the one before it, following loud with soft, busy with laconic. She made good use of parallel harmonies; most of her playing was chordal, making her infrequent use of single lines all the more striking. Liebowitz's consonances were touched with dissonance, and her dissonances possessed the clarity of a major triad. The individual pieces, as well as the concert itself, were models of concision. After each, Liebowitz would look up shyly, as if to cue the capacity audience that she had finished, though there was seldom any doubt, so well-constructed were her improvisations.

Knowing Ken and Connie (and by reputation, Andrea) as I do, the night's second set could have consisted of practically anything. Although they're adept at every aspect of jazz performance – “From Ragtime to No Time” (to quote the title of an album by the late Beaver Harris) – when left to their own devices they tend not to compartmentalize, but rather treat jazz as a seamless continuum wherein anything is possible. This night, they dwelt mostly on the outer fringe, a place where convention is politely asked to sit down and shut the hell up.

Like Liebowitz before them, the trio improvised freely, although they divided their performance into fewer and longer episodes. The three musicians both fulfilled and subverted expected roles. Wolper played the melodic lead, but was as often inclined to evanesce, her non-verbal vocals gracefully merging with the whole, especially Filiano's bass. Given the human voice's unlimited capacity to make strange sounds, the temptation exists for a vocal improviser to indulge his or her most outrageous urges. I've heard some do just that, and it's seldom pretty. Wolper resists the impulse. She incorporates such techniques as glossolalia and melisma sparingly and effectively. She's not a bit afraid to play it straight and simple. Neither is Filiano. Although a profoundly intense improviser and prodigiously gifted bassist, he's in such complete control of his resources as to let the music flow naturally. When it's time to play the bassist's customary role, he plays it. When it's time to take the melodic lead, he takes it. When it's time to act the percussionist, he acts it. Crothers – a world-class pianist of remarkable skill and imagination and apparently little, if any, ego – is just as sensitive to the music's needs. Her touch varies from hard as nails to smooth as butter. Her energy is as limitless as her imagination, her commitment to creating in the moment complete. Combined, the trio created music that veered from lean minimalism to extreme maximalism, from 20th-century “new music” strategies to the unruliest free jazz. Like all the best improvised music, the performance was endlessly varied and supremely, joyously evocative of its singular time and place.

It's fascinating to hear Connie Crothers in a context such as this, knowing that she's also as fine and as distinctive a straight-ahead jazz pianist as you'll ever find. Her art literally knows no boundaries. That she shares that openness so freely with such a wide range of talented students gives me hope for the future of jazz education – not in the institutional sense, but in the person-to-person, wisdom-handed-down-from-one-generation-to-the-next sense. That's where the most effective jazz teaching has always been done, and, I suspect, where it will continue to be done, long after overpriced university jazz programs run out of teenagers to fleece. On a day when the 2009 MacArthur Grants were announced without the inclusion of a jazz musician, I'm thinking, for 2010, the selection of Connie Crothers would be a great way for the Foundation to get back into the groove.

• About me ...



“[Chris Kelsey](#) is a writer and saxophonist living in Dutchess County, NY. In addition to this blog, Chris contributes regularly to [Jazz.com](#) and [JazzTimes](#). He's also recorded several albums, most for the [CIMP label](#). His latest as yet untitled recording will be released this fall.”