

Tablet

The Jazz Sound and Jewish Films

David Krakauer links the mediums

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By Jake Marmer



“New York is the jazz capital of the world!” yelled out the enthused emcee at Le Poisson Rouge, at one point, this Saturday night. And it really felt like it, too: according to the organizers of this year’s Winter JazzFest that included dozens of bands in six venues across New York’s Greenwich Village, the event was completely sold out. Block-long crowds piled outside of each venue, and Le Poisson Rouge, the festival’s main stage, was jam-packed from early on in the night, which is when David Krakauer’s “Big Picture” project took stage.

David Krakauer is major clarinetist: although world-renown for his klezmer chops, he’s brought his sound into worlds as diverse as funk, classical music, and avant-garde jazz. The newest project, however, is not a genre exploration, but a conceptual one. “Big Picture” is about reinterpretation of American film music—some of the most poignant tunes, played behind the screen. More often than not, caught up in a film’s narrative, we do not even notice these melodies, as they surface on the background and fade out. And yet they have a major effect on us—amplifying our emotions, refocusing and guiding our attention. It is that very emotional-laden memory that Krakauer’s sound taps into—the vague but potent recollection of how we felt watching films he’s borrowed melodies from: “The Pianist”, “Lenny”, “Sophie’s Choice”, and “Life is Beautiful” among others.

To me, the point was brought home most explicitly when the band went into “Body & Soul,” as a tribute to Woody Allen’s “Radio Days”. The melody is familiar to anyone with even a cursory interest in jazz: it has been covered by such giants as Coleman Hawkins and John Coltrane, Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan. Yet, riffing on Benny Goodman’s version that Woody Allen uses in his film, Krakauer brought to the stage, the very quintessence of what a classic Woody Allen movie feels and sounds like. Sure, we all laugh at Woody’s self-deprecating, neurotic quips (and as per Woody’s opinion piece in this weekend’s Times), the neuroticism is still going strong), but what makes his films so memorable is a certain magical, romantic, anything-is-possible-and-yet sort of an attitude that those vintage jazz tracks bring to us, from the background.

Krakauer closed the set with a song, which, he announced “you can all help us with, I’m sure”. It was none other than “Tradition” from “Fiddler on the Roof”, which, indeed, the crowd shouted along to, on band’s cue. Indeed, the jazz capital of the world – and the capital of a few other things, too.

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