

Bokani Dyer's Music Feels All-Encompassing Even While Being Unique

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Bokani Dyer. Via Brownswood Recordings



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Bokani Dyer

'Radio Sechaba'

Brownswood Recordings

Is Bokani Dyer a good representative of contemporary African jazz? Of course he is, but, at the same time his music is so special and so unique to him that I

would have a hard time describing it as being “typical” of anything other than Mr. Dyer himself — certainly I can’t imagine anyone else creating music like this.

Mr. Dyer is a pianist, bandleader, composer, and frequent vocalist regarded as South African, though he was born in Botswana in 1986, at a time when his father, the prominent saxophonist Steve Dyer, was exiled there during the last years of Apartheid.

His music is, in fact, more than one thing: He has a new album, “Radio Sechaba,” and did a gig at Dizzy’s in the last weekend of April, ostensibly to promote the May release. Most artists, when plugging their latest albums, will play mostly that content; some will vary it but essentially give you music cut from the same cloth. Mr. Dyer, though, has given us two very different kinds of music with two very different bands, neither of which fits into conventional categories.

The music on the CD is ostensibly jazz with heavy elements of pop and soul, though I don’t think I’d describe it as “fusion.” “Radio Sechaba” starts with Mr. Dyer delivering a message in multi-tracked harmony, using his voice in something that’s halfway between singing and speaking. Under the vocals, there’s an electronically manipulated guitar background. The words tell us: “Don’t fight with the moment / just be where you are.” Those last four words are the song title.

Throughout the album, Mr. Dyer combines a wide range of textures, vocal and instrumental, electronic and acoustic, and those vocals themselves incorporate a virtually every form musical expression of what the human voice is capable of, beyond singing and chanting to narrating (i.e., speaking) and rapping — and in multiple languages, English as well as African tongues. Most tracks use electric rhythm instruments, including Mr. Dyer on keyboards but with traditional trumpets and saxophones. The beat is consistently danceable, much more so than most modern jazz, but I don’t know that I would automatically identify it as being distinctly African; it just seems to uniquely belong to Mr. Dyer.

The lyrics are philosophical, upbeat, and affirmative, often repeating a single idea many times, as on “Move On,” wherein Mr. Dyer chants over and over as the track fades out, “Just move on – and be strong.” “State of the Nation” features Damani Nkosi delivering what is essentially a set of instructions for social and political involvement, ranging from the general (“strengthen the family”) to the specific (“grow your own food”). “Tiya Mowa” features the very attractive sounds of what seems a female vocal group mixed in with the ensemble, behind Mr. Dyer’s voice and the other soloists. It turns out to be a single singer, Sibusisiwe Dyer. Keeping it in the family, Steve Dyer also plays on three tracks, including “Amogelang.”

At Dizzy’s, Mr. Dyer performed with bassist Zwelakhe-Duma Bell le Pere and drummer Kush Abadey, and, as a special guest, a celebrated young tenor saxophonist from Chile, Melissa Aldana. The quartet, which became a quintet when Mr. Dyer senior joined the four younger players for several tunes, played completely acoustically, but whether the tunes were fast or slow they all had that distinctive loping beat that must be a signature among South African players.

Mr. DYER dedicated several pieces to iconic African musicians – Abdullah Ibrahim was the one name that everyone in the crowd recognized – and there was a touch of Thelonius Monk in his rhythms as well, or at least those aspects of Monk that sound most directly African.

Even though Mr. Dyer described the two rhythm players as homeboys, the rapport between the pianist and the saxophonist was even more remarkable; clearly, she knows and understands his music very well. She fits with the group even to the point of adjusting her intonation to match the mood of the piece; on several tunes, she changed the sound of her instrument to that of what we might hear if a tenor saxophone and a soprano had a baby, a kind of B flat hybrid. Still, on other pieces, she sounded perfectly in tune, at least according to the conventional notions of Western ears and North American jazz.

The high point of the all-too-brief Dizzy's set was the moment when Steve Dyer, who earlier had led his own group with Bokani on keyboards, joined his son's quartet. At this point, Ms. Aldana unveiled yet another saxophone sound, when she and Mr. Dyer Sr. played long, slow-ish ensemble passages together — as on “Medu” — producing a sound that was both haunting and otherworldly. They were playing so closely together that I wasn't sure if it might actually be unison rather than harmony.

Mr. Dyer demonstrated another sound one doesn't hear very often when he “prepared” his piano — the term is from John Cage — by placing sheets of paper on the strings to deaden the resonance and make it sound like an African percussion instrument.

Jazz at Lincoln Center's Seton Hawkins, who facilitated the booking and introduced the show, reminded us that the Dyers last played Dizzy's in 2019, and that the club has been trying to get them back ever since. The Dyers are used to borders and boundaries holding them back and dictating where they can play, but lately they, as everyone else, have had their professional fortunes determined by the virus as well. Still, it would take considerably more than politics and even a pandemic to stifle this music and the message of hope that it brings.