

Carter trio shines at Albany jazz festival

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ALBANY -- On Sunday, the seven-and-a-half hour Albany Riverfront Jazz Festival focused squarely on jazz vocalists, but it was the lone instrumental act of the day -- the James Carter Organ Trio -- that stole the show with a rip-roaring midafternoon performance.

Super saxman Carter has been something of a regular around the Capital Region concert halls in recent years, and he's played those performances in a variety of musical incarnations. Sunday was the area debut of his organ trio, which also featured Gerard Gibbs on organ and Leonard King on drums.

Carter was his usual, explosive self, alternating on soprano and tenor sax. He came roaring onto the stage with Oscar Pettiford's "Tricotism," squawking and honking with the kind of sheer intensity that too few musicians possess even at the climax of their shows. "Bingo Domingo" and the closing wail of "JC on the Set" also hit the mark, but it was the strutting "Soul Street" that found Carter and crew at their most frantic and impassioned.

And just to prove that he knows how to play pretty, too, he served up Duke Ellington's classic "Don't You Know I Care," a sublimely sultry, bluesy ballad.

The other red-hot act of the day wasn't really a band at all, but rather a melding of two bands. Capital Region Latin jazz faves Sensemaya and Mundo Nuevo joined forces, creating a sizzling salsa band that filled the dance floor with gyrating couples. Each band played one solo tune, and Mundo Nuevo's rendition of the Cuban ballad "Black Tears" was an emotional highlight. But when both bands teamed up as a nine-piece ensemble, the sparks really flew, especially on the Mongo Santamaria hit "Sofrito."

Singer Sonya Kitchell kicked off the fest with a performance so nuanced that it was impossible to believe that she's just 15. Kitchell also is an impressive songwriter, and her own tunes made up the bulk of her set, most notably "Fly Away" and "Someday." Look out, Norah Jones.

Ann Hampton Callaway headlined the fest, and while she's a fine singer, her cabaret-oriented show seemed to be missing some of the required intimacy. "I Got the I'm Too White to Sing the Blues Blues" was a throwaway novelty, but she delivered time-honored standards by Harold Arlen and George Gershwin, as well as more pop-flavored material from Van Morrison and Carole King. Her best song of the night was one she made up on the spot from a laundry list of audience suggestions. The resulting "Hudson Blues" was a sure-fire Albany Chamber of Commerce theme song, something like an upstate cousin of Billy Joel's "New York State of Mind."

ALBANY RIVERFRONT JAZZ FESTIVAL

When: Noon Sunday

Where: Albany Riverfront Park, Corning Preserve

Featuring: Ann Hampton Callaway, the James Carter Organ Trio and more

The crowd: 5,000 to 6,000 at the afternoon peak



Pamela and Pedro Perez dance during the Albany Riverfront Jazz Festival on Sunday. (Paul Buckowski / Times Union)