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the Rick McLaughlin Trio

The Regattabar

Cambridge, MA

September 16, 2003

RICK MCLAUGHLIN DOES THREE THINGS VERY WELL. HE BANTERS WITH his audience, something that many musicians attempt but few succeed at doing. He plugs a CD better than most marketing professionals do. Finally, and most importantly, he plays the bass. This is where McLaughlin's true talent lies, and when combined with the outstanding work by Greg Burk on piano and Jeremy Udden on saxophone, the Rick McLaughlin Trio is sure to make a strong impression on the Boston jazz scene. In celebration of the group's new disk, *Study of Light*, the Regattabar performance before an enthusiastic crowd offered over an hour of music marked by diverse influences, high musical standards, and the sheer and contagious enjoyment felt by musicians who love doing what they do.

The Trio opened their set with "Isfahan," a swingy number in which each instrument enjoys its own independent musical line. These lines intersect beautifully with one another, with Burk and Udden in particular playing off of each other during the improvisational sections. Burk must be listening to a great deal of Gershwin these days, a hint of "Rhapsody in Blue" foreshadowed later Gershwin quotes that turned up throughout the evening's performance. These quotes were never out of musical context; Burk is a talented improviser whose skill lies both in technical facility and in knowing exactly where and how to place a note.

McLaughlin's "Marina" (named for his wife) begins with a stirring bass solo with high notes that resonate as if from a bell. The bass sings in his capable hands. "Marina" also demonstrates McLaughlin's skill as a composer. Whether it is Burk plucking the strings of the piano or Udden playing with a breathy, plaintive tone on the soprano saxophone, it is always apparent that McLaughlin knows how to write for these instruments, and specifically for the instrumentalists in his trio. "Marina" was followed by Burk's "Ink," the impetus of which was the avant garde jazz of the early 1960s. On piano, Burk uses the pedals to create a wash of sound against which McLaughlin and Udden play. McLaughlin's bowed solo introduces a new depth of sound within the trio; he is adept at switching from plucking to bowing and makes great use of pitch bending. Burk utilizes extended techniques as well as he holds down keys and strums the piano's strings, causing the instrument to sound alternately like a harp and a snare drum. The use of such techniques is indicative of the conservatory training enjoyed by all three members of the group - all graduates of New England Conservatory - and their ability to incorporate these techniques into their jazz performance is a tribute not only to their musicality, but to the continuously burgeoning jazz department at NEC. Too often this outstanding program goes unnoticed; perhaps the release of *Study of Light* will help to change that.

Burk's quote of Gershwin's "Fascinating Rhythm" in the piece "O.P." (composed by bassist Sam Jones for bassist Oscar Pettiford) is extensive and extremely well played. McLaughlin is all over the bass during his solo, in homage to the two great bassists responsible for the piece. "O.P." is a work with which the trio clearly has fun. Udden's "Every Step" is straightforward but catchy, and his soprano saxophone solo is lovely but cautious. Burk is a bit more adventurous than Udden during his solo. That said, Burk is a more seasoned performer than Udden, and it is certain that Udden will take more chances with his own works as he expands his performing and compositional repertoires.

An unusual yet remarkable musical moment occurred with McLaughlin's transcription of the second movement of the string quartet by the French impressionist composer Maurice Ravel. The Trio's rendition is simply outstanding, and the group is to be commended for its sensitivity in placing the piece in an entirely new element and making it work. Ravel wrote only one string quartet ("And too bad for him," McLaughlin stated prior to performing the movement), and the Trio's version exemplifies the versatility and imagination that Ravel put into his works. One senses that were Ravel to hear the piece in McLaughlin's configuration, he would be pleased.

The Trio closed with "Without a Song," a number in a traditional jazz style, with a walking bassline and a solo section that gives each musician the chance to strut his stuff one final time. One last plug for *Study of Light* left many reaching for their wallets, and with good reason. The Rick McLaughlin Trio may just become one of Boston's great jazz ensembles, and *Study of Light* should not be missed.

-Katie DeBonnis