

Ed Fast, Conga-Bop Jazz It Up At Asylum Hill Church

By CHUCK

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Drummer Ed Fast carried his Conga-Bop septet through two sets of lighthearted Latin jazz at Hartford's Asylum Hill Congregational Church Friday. Moreover, he added a dramatic element to the concert by recounting his personal musical journey in words and photographs.

The slide show -- complete with brief but compelling narrative -- was a brilliant stroke by Fast. He probably surmised that some in the audience wouldn't be familiar with Hartford's vibrant jazz scene, so he offered snippets of local and international jazz history as a way to introduce many of the pieces played by Conga-Bop.

Perhaps Fast's most affecting recollection centered on one of his unsung heroes, conga master Bill Fitch, who enjoyed a brief period of acclaim during the 1960s before vanishing from the jazz scene. Fast tracked Fitch down in New Haven and coaxed him out of retirement for a time. Conga-Bop performed a festive version of Fitch's "Insight," a tune made famous by vibraphonist Cal Tjader in 1963.

Conga-Bop's co-founder, conguero Jorge Fuentes, worked in tandem with Fast all night to provide the rhythmic heartbeat that sustains the group. His conga solo during "Do or Die," an original by Fast, provided one of the concert's most captivating moments. All three members of the horn section also doubled on small percussion instruments, adding to the dance-inducing nature of this music.

Trumpeter Jim Hunt took the spotlight on "The Last Bullfighter," a mercurial tune that opened the second set. His Spanish-tinged horn blasts rang with the machismo one would expect to encounter in a bullring. Tenor saxophonist Chris Herbert another Conga-Bop veteran, functioned as the septet's primary melodicist; his sultry statement during the Gershwin classic, "Summertime," was especially endearing.

"Summertime" also gave Hartt School of Music sophomore Shenel Johns an opportunity to show off her impressive vocal range. Johns remained onstage for a surprisingly uptempo version of "Days of Wine and Roses." She's a young lady with a bright future, if her cameo at AHCC was representative of her capabilities.

Johns' participation touched on another important facet of Ed Fast's artistry: his willingness to nurture young talent. Quite a few of the photos he displayed included Hartford's Curtis Brothers, and their circle of young musical associates. Fast mentored these musicians from the time they were children, and he spoke like a proud father of their current nationally recognized endeavors.

Similarly, Fast has recently invited Hartt student Dave Julian to join the group on trombone, and Julian rose to the occasion Friday with consistently solid horn work. His trombone teacher at the University of Hartford, Steve Davis, has often performed with Conga Bop.

Fast's talent scouting recalls that of another drummer, Art Blakey, whose Jazz Messengers band served as a musical university for several generations of outstanding improvisers. Conga-Bop's bassist, Matt Dwonszyk, just 19, sounded right at home in this highly charged percussive setting. Pianist Dan Campolietta, a 2008 UConn grad, serves as organist at AHCC, but his formidable jazz chops resounded throughout the sanctuary during Friday's concert.

The leader's desire to share credit with his colleagues did not diminish his contributions to Conga-Bop's music. He directed the band from center stage, standing behind two timbales, two cowbells and a cymbal. The group played six of his originals, including "Straight Shot," the title track from their 2007 debut recording. Fast's percolating rhythms bolstered each piece, even though he didn't step out to solo until the evening's closer, "Quest."

Conga-Bop encored with a euphoric take on the New Orleans second-line grooves of Marcus Printup's "The New Boogaloo." The snowy night air seemed just a little warmer after that fabulously funky send-off.

Ed Fast and Conga-Bop will perform at the Firebox Restaurant, 539 Broad St., Hartford on Wednesdays, March 24 and March 31, from 8-11 p.m. For details, phone 860-246-1222, or visit www.fireboxrestaurant.com.

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