

Riffs: Ed Fast at Baby Grand

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By Owen McNally

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As the percussion playing leader of Conga-Bop, the hard-swinging Latin jazz ensemble, Ed Fast has become a celebrated figure in town through his band's many well-received appearances in Hartford, including its soulful, sizzling sessions at The Firebox Restaurant.

As a versatile, Hartt School-trained percussionist, Fast is also right at home sitting-in on occasion with the Hartford Symphony Orchestra, touring with premier Broadway road shows throughout Russia, > China, Japan and South Korea, or gigging in backup bands at Foxwoods or Mohegan Sun accompanying big-name, casino favorites like Aretha Franklin and Paul Anka.

Besides being a bandleader, composer, arranger and much-in-demand utility player, Fast is a multi-instrumentalist who not only plays drums but also timbales, congas and, far too rarely, vibes, a weighty, bulky but beautiful mallet percussion instrument he dearly loves but loathes to lug to gigs.

"Vibes is a great instrument, but if I've got to chose between drums or vibes it's a real problem because I can't fit them all in the car for one thing. And, besides, a lot of clubs just don't have the kind of space they need," Fast says by phone from his Hartford home.

For The Hartford Public Library's enormously popular, admission-free "Baby Grand Jazz" series, Fast is putting the drums aside for the moment and packing his beloved vibraphone into his car and driving it to his vibes-centered concert with his quintet Sunday at 3 p.m. in the downtown library's scenic atrium, 500 Main St.

Helping the mallet master bring good vibes to the "Baby Grand Jazz" series will be Jesse Hameen, a timbales wizard from New Haven; George Fuentes, congas; Sam Parker, piano; and Matt Dwonszyk, bass.

"We're going to do a lot of Latin jazz featuring the vibes, mostly things by Cal Tjader and Tito Puente, some originals and one number that the great vibraphonist Milt Jackson liked to play a lot, Horace Silver's 'Opus de Funk.' We'll add a couple horns with a few special guests on a couple numbers." Fast says.

As a junior high school student and budding percussion player, Fast, who was born in Albany and grew up in Old Lyme, took marimba lessons as his first step towards playing vibes. As busy as he is playing drums with Conga-Bop or in Broadway pit bands, he retains his deep affection for vibes, an instrument that gives him the opportunity to express melodic and harmonic ideas.

Fast's love for Jackson, a premier jazz vibraphonist, goes back to when he was a kid discovering the world of possibilities in jazz.

"Milt Jackson was the first vibes player that really knocked me out playing with Thelonious Monk on 'Willow Weep for Me.' I sat down and transcribed the whole thing, note-for-note," he recalls.

But it was the swinging, sophisticated music of vibist/bandleader Cal Tjader that sparked his passion for Latin jazz, the musical love of his life. What got him hooked, he says, were Tjader's arrangements with their meticulous attention to detail, along with the varied rhythms and array of percussion instruments that powered the Tjader band.

"Cal had some of the best percussionists in his band, including, Mongo Santamaria, Willie Bobo and Poncho Sanchez, who now leads his own great Latin band. And there was my buddy, the legendary Bill Fitch, who's passed away now but played in that band."

As a special tribute to Fitch, a musician with a brief, skyrocketing career and a tragic fate, Fast will play the late, great conga player's renowned composition, "Insight," as his quintet's grand finale at the library.

Fitch, who vanished from the scene at the peak of his fame in the 1960s, several decades later played an informal mentor-like role in Fast's unending quest to explore the open-ended expressiveness of Latin jazz. Fitch, who died in his late 60s in 2010 in Hartford, had been widely celebrated for his superb conga solo on his now canonical composition, "Insight," which appeared on Tjader's classic 1963, Verve album, "Sola Libre."

Fitch's solo on "Insight" and the piece itself inspired Fast so profoundly that the then young musician sat down and transcribed the exciting number note-for-note.

Years later, in the mid-1990s, Fast, who had long wondered what had become of the elusive, mysterious Fitch, hooked up with the once celebrated conguero in New Haven where the Elm City native had become a non-person, living obscurely in his hometown far removed from his glory days with Tjader.

"At some point Bill fell on hard times in California," Fast says of his friend's unraveling fate.

"He lost his gig with Cal and wound up staying in flop-houses in Haight-Ashbury, on a sailboat at a marina in Sausalito, and in the mountains in Tucson, Ariz. Bill eventually received a one-way ticket to New York through a program that Tucson ran to try and deal with the homeless situation out there.

"Back in New York, Bill was strung-out for a while and was assaulted while staying in a shelter. He was picked up by a cabbie and checked into Bellevue, where he said he met the most interesting people and the food was delicious.

“Eventually, Bill made it back to New Haven where he was suffering from what he described as a nervous breakdown. He suggested that I should never have one. ‘Your nerves,’ he said, ‘feel like ground-up glass.’

“As far as I know, Bill did not play professionally for close to two decades until we met in the mid-1990s.”

Fast ushered his fallen idol back into the music, bringing him to Hartford from New Haven for gigs and to hang out with the talent-laden family of the Curtis brothers. Fitch, he says, was astounded by the phenomenal bass playing of the then 9-year-old Luques Curtis.

“Bill’s first gig with my group, which was called Home Cookin’ at that time, was at The Hartford Public Library on New Year’s Eve, maybe in 1996,” Fast recalls of his personal project to get Fitch back in the groove again.

“I have that recorded on video cassette, along with another one of his appearances with us at the library. We also played at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the Hartford and the New Haven Festivals of Jazz and the Sunken Garden Poetry Festival at the Hill-Stead Museum.”

On his acclaimed Conga-Bop CD, “Straight Shot,” released in 2007, Fast even featured Fitch as a special guest artist.

Musically, Fast says, he learned much from watching Fitch play, absorbing the forgotten old master’s wisdom about everything from the fine art of phrasing to the dynamics of tone.

“Bill was a fantastic musician, close friend and a truly amazing human being. We had some great times together,” Fast says.

Sunday marks Fast’s debut in the “Baby Grand Jazz” series,” which has been drawing enthusiastic, overflowing crowds with its free, one-hour Sunday matinees. Its 2012 season opener on Jan. 8 attracted nearly 400 or, by one count, 441 people gathered in the atrium performance space, by far the series’ biggest, most dramatic turnout since it was launched in 2004.

“I went to that opening concert and the library was absolutely packed with people. People were standing in the atrium where they had to bring in extra seats. There was even a big crowd of onlookers looking down on the concert-goers, hanging over the railing on the level above,” Fast says enthusiastically.

“It’s such a great thing for Hartford! And with that terrific turnout, it just goes to show that jazz is very much alive!”

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