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The See Through Trio at the Argyle Gallery

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The Argyle Gallery acquitted itself well as the ideal venue in which to present the three year old Toronto-based See Through Trio's delightful set of jazz miniatures. The ten pieces, performed with crisp eloquence, a lightness of being, and extraordinary technical facility on double-bass, soprano sax and electric piano, ranged from a couple of hymn-based compositions, a wistful and beautifully melodic waltz, a catchy toe-tapping echo of the 1930s era music of a contemporary of Louis Armstrong, soprano sax jazz giant Sidney Bechet, to a number of "free form" or free jazz genre-pieces.

An interesting group, these three. Years past, a jazz musician sported shades, loud suits and a self-destructive lifestyle. When not practising (a lot), they were catching ZZZZs or scoring (sometimes compositions). To their fans, jazz seemed to be about wacky tobaccy and groovin'. My my, have times changed. Bassist Pete Johnston, a native of Windsor, Nova Scotia (who served as band spokesperson dishing up number intros with a crazy off-kilter and refreshing sense of humour) and soprano sax player Mark Laver (who ably channels the dry witty horn style of the late Paul Desmond, the mischievous stylish wag in the Dave Brubeck Quartet) are both working on PhDs in music ethnomusicology. Pianist Tania Gill (with a keyboard touch that puts one in mind of the brilliant Marilyn Lerner) studied classical piano repertoire at the University of Victoria and graduated from the McGill jazz program. These twenty-somethings are some far, far out cats.

Playing quietly demands rock-solid technical assurance. And nerve. But done well, volume restraint can engage an audience and wow them with nuance and the shouts of whispering with more force than could be achieved by a sonic pummeling at ear-bleed decibel levels. After years of being sidesmen in volume-happy electric groups, including rock bands, Johnston (a Charlie Hadenesque player), Gill and Laver made a brassy decision as a band to perform their self-penned compositions on acoustic instruments. It suits them well. Sharp musical ears, ready intellects and the delight they show in each other's accomplished playing is ready-made to draw an audience in to their music. Of the music on offer last night, the free form compositions paled in comparison to more "structured" works despite being well played. Somehow, after the adventurous Ornette Coleman exhausted free jazz and its jagged dissonance possibilities and moved on to his Harmolodics phase (which is definitely more interesting musically to listeners), free form music lost lustre and dated badly. Today the form's years beyond its shelf life. Obviously the trio members have gifts for melody (hard to find elsewhere of late) and an ensemble cohesion that really shines. More of this, please, and the See Through Trio will be turning many heads and ears in the near future.

Graham Pilsworth