



Review – Mel Martin and His Sextet Returns to the Douglas Beach House

By Bill Leikam
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Mel Martin and his sextet stepped into a “new” Douglas Beach House this past Sunday afternoon, August 16, 2009. During the previous week, owner and impresario Pete Douglas decided to go back to the roots of jazz by stripping out the mixing board and the sound system, leaving only a hot vocal mic and monitors available for the musicians. It was into this setting that Mel along with New York’s legendary pianist Don Friedman, bassist Robb Fisher, drummer Jeff Marrs, guitarist Brad Buethe, and John Santos on congas and percussion, settled in to present Martin’s newest album “Where the Warm Winds Blow”.

No one knew just how the house would sound but by the end of the show, everyone was more than pleased. The first set opened with George Russell’s arrangement of “Ezz-Thetic”, and it was immediately apparent that Martin had brought to the Beach House an outstanding tight, gritty band. Mel’s flute came on strong and pure throughout the piece while keeping time was the band’s more than impressive drummer Jeff Marrs. “Rhythm Man (Do Not Disturb)” written by Mel Martin, was the second cut from their album. This was a tough, driving tune with Martin on his tenor sax, his fingers fluttering over the keys with amazing dexterity. I found it interesting that like Dizzy Gillespie, Mel sometimes puffed his cheeks when blowing hard. Deep into the tune, John Santos

on percussion and Jeff Marrs on his trap set careened into a duo – Martin calls it a percussion discussion – and what a discussion it was. It was obvious that both men had fun calling back and forth, playing off each other as though talking to each other. It took us on a unique trip. Later in the performance Mel Martin and Don Friedman played a duo on the Miles Davis’ tune “Blue in Green”. It was during this tune that Friedman caught the fire and brought the tune and his piano alive. Robb Fisher on standup bass reminded me of bassist Harvey S. Brad Buethe on guitar had a couple of interesting solos. Throughout, the solos by each band member were sharp and to the point. There is no laziness in this band, no getting hung up on their solo and taking it out too long. They were on a journey, the album showed the way, and they took the engrossed audience along with them.

Although Mel Martin based the evening concert on “Where the Warm Winds Blow”, the show had a few tunes such as “From Pops to Bop and Beyond,” woven in. The relatively small audience were handed a treat and on top of that Pete Douglas’ decision to go back to the roots proved a stroke of genius. When all was said and done, the audience gave them a standing ovation; not something that these sophisticated jazz lovers will do unless the performance warrants it. Their response both during and at the end of the show recommends that an evening with Mel Martin and his sextet is well worth the time to get out and hear them.