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Jazz in Bonaire

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On the Cover

Shot at the Jazz Brunch, Empatia's Carlos "Nene" Quintero's left hand is at a dead stop, the right is still in motion. Photo by Pitopolo. Visit www.pitopolo.com

See more of Pitopolo's photos in the Bonaire review, *right*. Uncredited photos are by Bill Wahl



"Buffalounious"

Our original mascot from the very early Buffalo Jazz Report days – mid '70s. He is older now, but global & still very cool!

Jazz in Bonaire

2008 Bonaire Heineken Jazz Festival Reviewed



Scott Katzev joined in on sax and flute with some of the bands

By Bill Wahl

In recent years, we have been moving into another specialty niche, so to speak. For just about 35 years now reviews of albums, and now CDs, has been our main focus. Then came the DVDs of live concerts and documentaries. But this more recent focus has been including music festivals, many of which are in tropical locations such as the Caribbean. In addition to the great jazz and blues festivals Ron Weinstock has covered stateside, I have been able to attend jazz festivals in St. Croix (U.S. Virgin Islands) and Riviera Maya (Mexico). Both of those were in the fall of 2007, so when spring 2008 rolled around I was itchy to be on the move again. One that looked good was the St. Lucia Jazz Festival. Then I heard about the 4th Annual Bonaire Heineken Jazz Festival, which was to be about two weeks after St. Lucia. To be honest, I had never heard of Bonaire. No one I mentioned it to had either, except for one person, a diver, who told me it is a paradise for divers and snorkelers. After some Googling, I also found out that much if it is a protected wildlife and nature reserve, and that there were not many people actually living on the island compared to others in the area. And what is the area?

Well, Bonaire is in the Dutch Caribbean and is part of a group of three islands that are very close to Venezuela. They are known as the "ABC Islands" – Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire. Interesting. When I looked at the lineup for the festival, I had never heard of any of the performers, except for Latin jazz drummer Willie Martinez – although I had never heard any of his albums. Well, the intriguing information I had gathered on Bonaire, mixed with the idea of hearing music from bands coming from places like Curaçao and Venezuela got me going. And since there was no way I could go to both St. Lucia and Bonaire, I chose Bonaire and sent my daughter to cover St. Lucia. Let me tell you, she had no trouble accepting the assignment.

So off she was, and then off I was.

It is actually quite easy to get to Bonaire from most any part of the United States. In this particular case, in order to hope to get to Bonaire in time for opening night, Thursday, May 22 at Fort Oranje at the harbor area, I had to take three flights, first to New York City, then to Aruba and then on to Bonaire. If I were to do it again, I would fly to San Juan and over, which is how I came back. All went well until the flight from Aruba was delayed for quite a while, so I arrived too late for the show anyway. Instead, I went directly to my hotel, Plaza Resort Bonaire, checked in and wandered to the beach bar, which was "manned" by two young Dutch female bartenders. They turned me on to a beer



Izaline Calister in motion (photo by Pitopolo)

I had never heard of...Amstel Bright. I'd heard of Amstel Light, but this is apparently aimed at the Corona crowd and is quite refreshing. Amstel is a Dutch beer, which is owned by Heineken. I was on a Dutch island, so it all began to make sense...no matter how tired I was. Anyway, this is not a beer review, so let's get on with it.

Friday I spent the day driving all over the island with one person who knew nothing about Bonaire, like myself, and another who knew everything about it. He lived there and was a veritable wealth of information. We'll get into that trip and the other island experiences in a while. Now, off to the show.

As mentioned earlier, I missed the first night at the fort, which featured an art exhibition with live jazz followed by vocalist Izaline Calister with her trio, a poetry reading and more. From what I was told, it was an enjoyable evening. And although I very much wanted to hear Izaline, no worry – she was the headliner for the Friday night concert. Now moving to a stage at the Plaza Resort Bonaire, it was certainly convenient for me since I was staying there. The stage was right at the beach with several hundred chairs set up. Apparently more people showed up than anticipated, and chairs continued to be brought in and set up as the night went on.

The first band on stage was the Bonaire Student Band. The large band changes pretty much every year and is led by guitarist and music teacher Robert Swinkels. The band mostly features students who attend the Scholen Gemeenschap Bonaire, the local high school. These were some talented kids who played Latinized R&B/jazz including a Latin take on "There Will Never Be Another You" and, if my memory serves me right (I write a lot of notes and then can't read some of them!), a version of Wayne Shorter's "Footprints." They were joined by a very fine tenor saxophonist Scott Katzev, who lives in Philadelphia but his parents live on Bonaire. Katzev would be seen and heard quite a bit throughout the festival, as he was a kind of Artist



Martina Gerling with Tin Foil (photo by Pitopolo)

In Residence. Also assisting was Moogie, a local who sings, plays percussion and acted as an MC.

Following the Student Band was Footsteps Ahead, a quartet consisting of sax/flute up front with piano, bass and drums, which opened with "Girl From Ipanema." This versatile band was equally adept at playing in a modal style as well as straight ahead, up-tempo swingers. While perhaps unknown in the states, they are well known in the islands as two of the members are from Aruba and one is from Cuba. Bassist Frankie Yanga, who I believe is the leader, is from New York. They finished their set with some interesting covers, such as "Yellow Moon."

The headliner for the evening was Izaline Calister, the singer I had missed the night before. This night she was with her full band and was an absolute pleasure to hear and watch. She has a great voice and stage presence, immediately capturing the audience and holding them tight throughout her performance. With a top-notch band, including a back-up singer, Izaline delivered a set of all originals sung in her native language, Papiamentu (she is from Curaçao). The music is a mix of jazz and Afro-Antilles music that is very percussive and an absolute crowd pleaser that is very hard to sit still to. It didn't matter a bit that she sung in a language I do not understand. I'd like to hear more from her. So did the crowd, who emphatically demanded an encore. For more info on Izaline and her music, visit



Carlos "Nene" Quintero with Empatia (photo by Pitopolo)



Pablo Gil with Empatia (photo by Pitopolo)

www.izalinecalister.com.

Saturday night's show opened with a local Bonaire band known as Tin Foil. Led by Jon Hilgers, this quartet plays original compositions with a rock base mixed with some tinges of R&B and Latin and jazz. One of their best songs was a blues/gospel ballad with alternate verses sung by Hilgers and guitarist/vocalist Martina Gerling, whose voice added a nice dimension to the band's sound. Another was a rock ballad sung by Martina, which constantly built in intensity. My guess is that Martina will be singing more and more as time goes on and her guitar work was quite good as well. And to think that she is only 16! Some of their material was more like folk/rock, and some more along the lines of classic rock. Scott Katzev joined in with them as well. The band's website is www.tinfoiltheband.com.

The next band up, Empatia, was from Venezuela and delivered a strong set of music that was exactly what I had hoped for. Knowing that Bonaire was so close to South America, the thought of hearing some bands that I would otherwise not encounter was one of my reasons for going to the festival. While Americans may be expecting Empatia to play Latin jazz, they instead delivered some very fine modal jazz along the lines of people like Wayne Shorter or Joe Henderson with some dynamic percussion courtesy of



J. Walter Hawkes with La Familia Sextet (photo by Pitopolo)

drummer Carlos "Nene" Quintero, who played hand drums and a battery of percussion instruments most of the time rather than the traditional drum set which he ignored for most of the performance. While they are all first class musicians, the special treat for these ears came from Quintero and Pablo Gil, who played tenor and soprano saxes and flute and was a standout on all three. His tone on both tenor and soprano was outstanding and he had an endless flow of ideas. An exceptional performance from Empatia. Pablo Gil's website is supposed to be www.gilpablo.com, but I can't get it to work. Perhaps this is a temporary situation.

So while the band from Venezuela played straight modal jazz, the band from New York City closed the night with Latin jazz. La Familia Sextet is led by drummer Willie Martinez, and its set of infectious, percussive Latin grooves got the crowd back on their feet again as they were for Empatia, but the between sets announcements had settled them back down. Martinez also sings and writes many of the band's compositions. One of the things that made this band so interesting is the somewhat *different* front line, which consisted of Max Schweiger on baritone sax and flute and J. Walter Hawkes on trombone. I was also especially impressed with upright bassist Jennifer Vincent, who is another of a number of excellent female bassists I have heard recently. Willie Martinez and the La Familia Sextet sounded every bit as good as one might expect given their impressive individual resumes. Pablo Gil, from Venezuela's Empatia, came back up at the end of their set and joined in with them. One of the songs they played was "After Winter, Spring," which is also the title of their new album, just re-



Cristian Rivera with La Familia Sextet (photo by Pitopolo)



Nene Quintero and Willie Martinez getting into it with a drum duet at the Jazz Brunch. J. Walter Hawkes is taking it in.

leased on June 17. You can sample the songs at <http://cdbaby.com/cd/wmlfs2>. For more information on the band, visit www.williemartinez.com.

The Sunday Jazz Brunch at Divi Flamingo turned out to be a real treat, in more ways than one. Just down the road from Plaza Resort and a bit closer to town, Divi Flamingo is a beach resort and casino, which, as I quickly found out, also offers some excellent food. The Jazz Brunch is the official closing event of the annual Heineken Bonaire Jazz Festival and is a jam session featuring many of the performers from the festival. Held outside practically right on the beach, the band and the diners were covered from the heat of the sun by a tarp, but it certainly didn't keep the music from being hot. The buffet style meal combined with the small club feel and a good sound system provided the best ending to a festival I have ever experienced. It was a good opportunity to meet and speak with many of the musicians and exchange info. I chatted with Willie Martinez for

a while, and got to hear him really well as he played drums for most of the long set and I somehow managed to get a front table. I also got to hear plenty from Empatia's percussionist, Nene Quintero, who played congas for most of the set about six feet in front of my seat. And it provided more time to hear bassist Jennifer Vincent and trombonist J. Walter Hawkes. Scott Katzev was there as well with plenty of playing time, and I must say he is quite a versatile player thinking back on the different bands he sat in with over the three days. The drummer from the Student Band, Christopher Maldonado, also sat in, sounding very good as he gave Martinez a break. And then there were some surprises. Several unannounced musicians, locals, sat in and sounded fantastic. One was a piano player; another played harmonica and another guitar. I talked to the guitar player, who looked familiar, after the set and it turned out to be Robbie Swinkels – the director of the Bonaire Student Band and, with the Bonaire Jazz Foundation, organized the festival. The only jazz harmonica player I have heard live that had a big impact on me was Toots Thielemans, that is until the "unknown" harmonica player at the brunch began to play. After some Googling, he turns out to be Henk Roozendaal, a Dutch painter who moved to Bonaire in 1999 and is very much "known" on the island. You can check out his art at www.bonairenet.com/roozendaal. I never did find out who the piano player was, but I'll keep working on it. There were some musicians I had hoped would be playing at the brunch that did not, such as Pablo Gil, but there were plenty of fine players on hand and the time went by way too quickly. Some of the songs I remember being played that day are Coltrane's "Equinox," Wayne Shorter's "Footprints," Monk's "Straight, No Chaser" and Kenny Dorham's "Blue Bossa." Those are four of my favorite tunes! If you are ever able to attend a future Heineken Bonaire Jazz Festival, by all means, do not miss out on the Jazz Brunch.

If you want information on the 2009 festival, visit www.bonairenet.com/jazz/. No information is up yet on next year's events, but I'm sure it will be as time draws closer.

OK, so we covered the festival. Now exactly what can someone expect when visiting Bonaire?

As I mentioned earlier, Bonaire is one of the three Dutch Caribbean (or Antilles, depending on who you ask) islands



Robbie Swinkels and Henk Roozendaal at the brunch



A street scene in Kralendijk, the capital city of Bonaire



A view from my balcony at the Plaza Resort Bonaire

that lie just off the coast of Venezuela. Bonaire is only 50 miles from Venezuela, and Aruba is even closer. Of the three islands, Aruba is the smallest and has 90,000 people. Curaçao is the largest and has 150,000 people. Bonaire is in the middle size-wise, but has only 14,000 residents. While Aruba is the most well known and is a tourist hot spot, Bonaire is a well-kept secret from most of the world, but not to divers by any means.

Bonaire has been voted for the sixth straight year-in-a-row as the #1 Top Dive Destination Overall (Caribbean/Atlantic) in the Scuba Diving Magazine's Readers Choice Awards 2008. It is consistently rated as one of the top 5 diving locations in the world. You can also enjoy snorkeling, kiteboarding windsurfing, kayaking and more water-related activities. I do not dive, but in talking with some divers I found that you can see turtles, squid, octopus, dolphins and countless other sea creatures. I did try a bit of snorkeling and saw seemingly hundreds of species of different fish in many different shapes and vibrant colors, not to mention the colorful and oddly shaped plants on the ocean floor. Bonaire has the most thriving fish population in the Caribbean and is well known for its pristine coral formations.

There are also a number of on-land activities or attractions one can try out, such as mountain biking, horseback riding, hiking, land sailing, cave tours, butterfly farms, na-



Don't step on a little lizard!

ture tours, bird watching and countless other things to keep you busy, whether you are the physically active or more laid back type of individual.

I stayed at the Plaza Resort Bonaire, which is about a 10-minute, easy walk to the main city on the island, Kralendijk. It is also very close to the airport, which can be handy as well. It turned out to be a great choice, not only because the main events for the jazz festival were held there, but it was a very comfortable and friendly place to relax. It has a private marina with a river that has many villas and buildings with suites on both sides. There are many other buildings, some with suites that have a view of the Caribbean. Mine had a view of the marina. The room was quite large and more of a European style, with the toilet in a room by itself rather than in the same room with the sink, shower and bathtub. This is certainly not unusual, given that it is a Dutch island. The staff was made up of Bonaire natives and people from Holland, who don't need a visa to work on the Dutch islands. All were very friendly, like the two bartenders mentioned earlier. There were several fine restaurants (the breakfast buffet is always a treat) and beach bars, and the beach itself, is quite the sight with its white sand. The resort has the largest variety of tropical plants, and trees, than I can remember seeing in one place, so walking the grounds was certainly never a bore. Many of the activi-



The beach at the Plaza Resort



A Bonaire church



Entering Washington Slagbaai National Park



Goats roam in rural areas, along with little pigs and donkeys

ties mentioned earlier are available right there, and it is well known for its Toucan Diving. I did my snorkeling bit right there as well. Of course, you can also set up tours to explore other part of the island. I can easily recommend the Plaza Resort for a super relaxing and very convenient place to stay. Just watch where you walk, as I noticed many cute little lizards, or perhaps baby iguanas strolling on the sidewalks. For more information on the Plaza Resort, and the many activities you can undertake there, visit www.plazaresortbonaire.com.

Just down the road apiece, the main town of Kralendijk offers a harbor with restaurants and small shops and a myriad of very brightly colored buildings. I ate at the City Café, right at the harbor, and had a tough time settling on a single choice from the large and quite varied menu. But in the end, I went with the local fish, Dorado, and could easily recommend it to everyone who enjoys a good, mild fish. It was the only restaurant I was able to try in town, and luckily it was a fine experience. I heard that Donna & Giorgio's down the street was good as well and has live music on the weekends. Karel's Beach Bar, also in the harbor area, is the big nightspot in town and has live music on weekends and sometimes during the week as well. There were quite a few shops in town, though not at all like places such as St. Maarten, St. Thomas and many of the other islands in

the Caribbean. Most of the people in town were native, but there were many Dutch nationals as well. All of them were extremely friendly, and as I recall, everyone spoke English. I was told that the kids on the island learn Dutch in school by age 5 or 6, then Spanish and English by age 12. By high school they can read and write all three. Boy, that is a far cry ahead of the U.S.

My island tour on the first day was a real eye opener, and quite an education. The town to the north, Rincon, is very small and is very close to Washington Slagbaai National Park. Rincon was originally the main town on the island because mountains, which protected it from pirates, surround it.

The man who took me on the tour, Rolando, seems to be the best-known guy on Bonaire, and is certainly a wealth of information. While we were driving he told me that the island is all coral, not volcanic. You can see the stages where the water level was. The main town, Kralendijk, means "A dike of coral." The island was divided into five properties in the days of the slaves, and you could see some of the fences and walls as we drove. One thing I noticed that I'd never seen before was the many cactus fences. In the northern area, north of Rincon, you can see little pigs, goats and donkeys roaming wild. This is where we entered Washington Slagbaai National Park.

The park occupies the entire northwestern section of the island and has never been developed. The last owners of the plantations sold the land to the government with the stipulation that it remains a natural sanctuary. We drove down winding roads for miles and miles seeing nothing but cacti, plants, trees, birds, reptiles, and, at last, the famous Bonaire pink flamingos. At first we spotted a single flamingo, then later several together. I got as close as I could to get a picture, but a sign warns you to stay back so as to not scare them off. I was told the flamingos are born white, then turn grey growing up and then pink. The healthier they are, the pinker they get. And both the males and females are the same color.

Preserving nature is a prime concern on the island, and the entire coast is a national wildlife preserve, with some areas even closed off to divers – although there are plenty of dive spots all around the coastal area.



One of the famous Bonaire pink flamingos

After leaving the national park, we continued to drive through some wilderness areas along the coast. There were many magnificent coral formations, some very large. I noticed some large oil tanks, which are filled by small oil tankers from Venezuela since the water off the coast of that oil-producing country is too shallow for the large tankers to dock. So the smaller ships deliver it to Bonaire, and the large tankers take it from Bonaire to closeby countries such as the U.S. as well as very far off destinations such as China. In fact, oil storage is the number two-income source for the island, after tourism. The third is salt production, which takes place on the southern part of the island.

After hours of driving we stopped to eat at a place called Maiky's Snack. This is a restaurant that was highly recommended for a traditional Bonaire meal, but I would never have been able to walk there (although I had thought about trying it.) It was in a kind of remote area just before the more populated areas of Kralendijk, and was surrounded by a cactus fence. We sat outside and drank a bottle of Polar Beer, a very nice, light brew from Venezuela. The menu here was traditional Bonairean cuisine, with things like goat stew. After seeing so many cute goats roaming around during our drive, I opted for the conch stew, and it was a delight. The Polar Beer complemented it well. Maiky's Snack could be a must on a Bonaire visit, but you'd better rent a car.

One of the people I met on this trip was a photographer from Curaçao named Pitopolo. He and I were at the same table for the Jazz Brunch and he loaded me up with a good deal more information on the region. He also offered some of his pictures for this piece if some of mine did not come

out. Most of mine did, but the ones from the nights at the Plaza Resort stage were pretty foul, so I thank him for sending me the performance pictures which accompany this story, as well as the cover photo. His photos are credited, and mine are not. You can find out more about Pitopolo by visiting his website at www.pitopolo.com

In closing, Not only did I enjoy the music...I also had the most relaxing, as well as most interesting experience I've had on any of the Caribbean islands I've visited over the years. Bonaire may be unknown to most, but that is one of the reasons it is a real find for the rest of us. And, if you dive, snorkel or are into the other activities I've mentioned, that just adds even more sparkle to this Caribbean jewel.



Natural beauty in Washington Slagbaai National Park

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