

John Abercrombie Organ Trio at The Jazz Standard, NYC

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The John Abercrombie Organ Trio

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If one did not know who John Abercrombie was, the natural thing would be to assume by the name of the group that he was an organist leading a trio with a drummer and a guitarist or a saxophonist — the typical "organ trio." However, since Abercrombie is a guitarist, calling this group "The John Abercrombie Trio" would be equally confusing, since he has led a number of trios with bass and drums. Moreover, the Hammond B3 is always a big enough of attraction in its own right to merit marquee status. Hence, the awkward group name will just have to remain.

This introductory detour helps to explain Abercrombie, because being something and not being it at the same time is characteristic of everything he does. As extensively documented in this article, Abercrombie's entire career has been about playing within the tradition but extending it in his unique way, and hence his recorded work (particularly that on ECM), rather than lending itself to easy categorization, can only be labeled "Abercrombie."

His connection to the organ goes back to his earliest days, as he has always professed a love for the sound of the organ and guitar together. The drummer on this date, Adam Nussbaum, links this group to his original group with organist Dan Wall, which made a number of records for ECM including *While We're Young* (1993), *Speak Of The Devil* (1994) and the live *Tactics* (1997). This concert set at the Jazz Standard, however, found the ubiquitous Gary Versace in the organ seat.

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Sitting right up front, I was able to see the musicians' interactions (including facial expressions) clearly. Nussbaum and Abercrombie know each other so well that one could see and feel the give and take between them. Abercrombie, as nominal leader, would let Nussbaum take the music temporarily to a different place and simply enjoy what happened. Nussbaum returned the favor, always listening to the

nuances in Abercrombie's phrasing and quickly adjusting, thus creating the sort of feedback loop that characterizes the best jazz.

Versace has recorded with both Abercrombie and Nussbaum, but not together in this format, though he has toured in Europe with them recently, at least since Wall decided he'd had enough of the road. But Versace is such a sensitive and creative musician that what he played fit right in, raising the level of the music—as testified by the numerous nodding approvals of both of his band mates. His solos, moreover, manifested a combination of emotion and intellect that appeals to the best in the listener. The aesthetic ambiguity that a listener is apt to notice during a jazz performance was quite apparent during an hour of music that could be said to represent the quintessential essence of jazz. Seen from one perspective, this was just another gig for Abercrombie and Company, music with great grooves and everyone having a good time. However, from another angle the music had great depth beneath the superficial level of its visceral, swinging groove: much was being said by all of the musicians—about themselves specifically and humankind in general. We were all at this event because of Abercrombie and the band, and though most of us were probably familiar with his recordings, we still waited to be entranced, uplifted and even changed by the discovery of the new within the familiar.

Concentrating on this particular artist on this night led to a reflection on the essence of art and its function. Abercrombie is a master of the oblique: his pieces have melody and harmony, but both sneak up on you and refuse to be predictable. Moreover, his overall sound is directly related to his technique: choosing for tonal reasons to use his thumb to pick the notes alters his pure technical facility, causing him to adjust his fretting hand by including slides, upward and downward slurs and unorthodox fingering choices—one might say he "slithers" around the fretboard as no other guitarist. The resulting combination, when added to the amplification level and effects, produces a total sound that is recognizable immediately as Abercrombie's but, even more to the point, simply as "John Abercrombie." The sound has become so inseparable from his compositions and his overall musical identity that the two are one, an indivisible whole.

All music is emotion-laden sound, but the feeling of the musician as "shaman" was rarely so strong, despite the music-maker's apparent nonchalance (or maybe because of it!). That one set by one group led by one musician could present all of these layers of insight simultaneously is frankly astounding, yet it's a revelatory experience that close followers of this music are privileged to have more often than a casual listener might ever suspect let alone comprehend.

Put succinctly, on this night in an isolated room in a big city the John Abercrombie Organ Trio rocked our world.