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Jazz heaven with Davidson, Murley, Braid

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SAXOPHONISTS TARA Davidson and Mike Murley front-lined the Davidson/Murley/Braid Quintet on the first of two sets in the Halifax Holiday Inn Commons Room at the TD Atlantic Trust Atlantic Jazz Festival on Friday.

With David Braid on piano, Ian Froman on drums and Jim Vivian on bass, the quintet is a pristine combo full of creative talent and musical serendipity. They compel attention to every note, every nuance, every twist of improvisational spontaneity. It's jazz heaven.

Davidson has recently released her first CD. She studied with Murley, and while she is definitely her own player, creatively independent and mature in her playing, she either picked up or developed on her own a sense of musical space and tonal beauty that also distinguishes Murley's playing.

Neither of them solo mindlessly. They hear with their fingers, and they hear in the moment. Together on some fine, sweet, beautifully co-ordinated duet lines, they created a tonal ambience ideally suited to Braid's pianistic poetics, while Vivian and Froman continually reminded us of the grit and groove of the deeper regions of jazz rhythm.

On at least two compositions, one a contrafact (composition based on the changes of an existing tune) by Murley on the I Got Rhythm changes, and the other Davidson's own Codebreaking (the title song on her new CD), the two saxophonists played with wild but disciplined abandon, improvising together at speed with extraordinary coherence and soloistic integrity.

In trademark style, Vivian ambushed the tempo by playing uncannily just slightly ahead of the beat — without getting faster or stumbling — contributing tremendous lift to the soloists' fingers.

Froman's style was rich and prolific, playing the form under the solos. At the same time, he produced an energy and a variety of drum and cymbal colours that closely accompanied the profusion of notes from the front line.

It's exhilarating to hear such playing in the acoustic intimacy of the Commons Room. The rhythmic highlight of this section of the set was Murley's composition for the quintet's drummer, called Mode For A 'Fro, a typically witty pun on Froman's hair style as well as the first three letters of his name.

Against soft harmonies sustained by the two saxophones, Braid played his Broken Castles. It was the most beautiful piece of music I have heard in all the nights of this varied and interesting festival one which didn't just suspend thought in the listener, but replaced it with tonal imagery and atmosphere.

How to follow such an act?

In a neat programming coup, jazz festival director Adam Fine put Joel Harrison and Harbor on for the second set.

Their music was an ideal contrast more austere, harmonies based more on neutral intervals which require no resolution. Yet the music only appears to be more

intellectual than emotional, because Harrison on electric guitar is also interested in using it and the various boxes that process its sound with an extremely delicate and even sensuous touch.

Saxophonist David Binney quite put me off during his first solo, though I admired his extraordinary technical facility as he raced up and down the range of the alto for several minutes in an endless profusion of notes, played at the absolute sound-barrier of the possible.

But later, he proved to be just as creative and interesting a player as Harrison in the way he balanced and contrasted his ideas on the next several pieces, especially on a piece called End Time.

Dan Weiss showed up to work his usual magic on time and tempo, while bassist Stephan Crump coaxed a variety of tones out of the strings as he teased the strings with his bow only millimetres from the bridge.

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