

Exhilarating Jazz Appreciation Month 2011 In Beautiful Montenegro by Virgil Mihaiu

F. Scott Fitzgerald, the writer who coined the term Jazz Age, mentioned “little Montenegro” in his masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* (published almost simultaneously with the first hearing of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*). In 2006 that country reemerged on the world’s map. Its tiny size stands in sharp contrast to its endless natural beauty.

But Montenegro also strives to display artistic potential. As has been proven by jazz’s developments during the last half of a century or so, this kind of music is capable of transfiguring the postmodern ethos of various nations into unprecedented sound-aesthetics. Therefore, despite being inhabited by only less than 700,000 people, the old/new country has been acting fast in this respect. Montenegro’s jazz community has found an adequate organizational body in the *Jazz Art Association*, based in the capital city of Podgorica. Founded by Maja Popovic in 2009, JAM had a catalytic effect upon musicians, educators, scholars, spectators, through concerts, workshops, festivals, teaching, mass media promotion, etc.

This year’s main guests were the members of the New York based *Eli Yamin Quartet*. An apt choice, given their individual improvisational skills, ample stylistic horizons, versatility, homogeneity, and pure joy of communicating with the spectators. And, mind you, the latter were as enthusiastic as any East European jazz buffs. The quartet’s recital began with a paraphrase of the uplifting theme *O svjetla majska zora* (a folkloric melody whose arrangement by Zarko Mirkovic has been turned into the Montenegrin anthem), in alternation with swing passages evoking the origins of jazz. Most of the pieces were imbued by jazz basics, such as blues, gospel, swing, bebop, with inborn hints to rhythm-and-blues or rock&roll. Pianist/vocalist Eli Yamin didn’t make a

secret out of his admiration for Ellington, and truly produced some referential soloing in the vein of his maestro, whilst in other outings he went the entire spectrum from feather light pointillism to heavy-duty ostinati. In the case of alto sax-player Zaid Nasser the major influence came from Sonny Stitt, but the fleetness of his interpretation evinced due respect for Charlie Parker. Bassist Ari Roland's originality resides in always doing his (very consistent) solos *con arco* – i.e., using only the bow – while for the accompanying passages he resorted to the customary walking-bass *pizzicato*. Drummer LaFrae Sci was an alert rhythm propeller, and – in her improvisations – she always managed to suggest melodies and harmonies only through sensitive percussion accents. A nice gesture from the musicians was to dedicate the piece *Just One* to Maja Popovic, indeed the irreplaceable creator of this beautiful feast.

Eli Yamin's Quartet engendered similar enthusiastic response from the audience in two other performances: at the charming Royal Theatre in the ancient Montenegrin capital Cetinje (situated under Mount Lovcen, on whose peak 19th century king & poet Njegos lies in his mausoleum, designed by the great sculpturer Ivan Mestrovic), and at Porto Montenegro/Yacht Club in Tivat, on the country's fabulous Riviera.

In fact, what impressed me most in Montenegro – besides the eternal natural beauty – were the vitality, young energy and artistic potential of its rather scant population. Such features were properly revealed by the culmination of the *Jazz Appreciation Month 2011*: the European premiere of the jazz musical *Nora's Ark* composed by Eli Yamin and written by Clifford Carlson. That play had been conceived, about a decade ago, as part of The Jazz Drama Program, a NY based nonprofit organization which strives to use musical theatre as a way to engage middle school students and introduce them to jazz music, as well as explore topics that are relevant to them. Premiered in 2000, *Nora's Ark* is based on a funny scenario about a scientist named Nora who predicts the flooding of the Earth. Rescuing the animals at the Bronx Zoo, Nora

and her daughters rent a cruise ship. It seems all are saved, except that daughter Fitzzi forgets to bring food. Fortunately, all animals discover that freedom is a greater sustaining force than food, and ultimately cooperate in finding an edible solution. The “educational aim” of the play was to tell a tale about living harmoniously, working together and empathizing with others. But its major gain is, by far, the musical one.

Maja Popovic had the commendable idea of re-creating this swinging and youthful musical play on Montenegrin soil, involving *Eli Yamin's Quartet* for the instrumental part, and at least 50 youngsters, pupils of Podgorica's *Vasa Pavic* School of Music & Ballet, to whom the choral and vocal solo parts were assigned, plus some simpatico in-between stage movement. Obviously, the grand choir – excellently coordinated by Mira Popovic – had to study its score in advance. Yet the more challenging aspect of this long-distance collaboration occurred during the first week of Jazz Appreciation Month 2011, when the American instrumentalists and their Montenegrin alumni met for daily rehearsals. Considering the brief amount of time allowed for these on-the-spot workshops, the results were amazing: on April 7th 2011, the overcrowded hall of KIC Podgorica witnessed an exhilarating performance, with dozens of teen-agers and children singing in English so naturally as if they had been a part of the show's previous representations in Santa Fe, Moscow/Idaho, New York and other American cities. There was admirable coordination among the performers of this jazz musical for children (a work due to become a reference in the field). Fact is that the author never lowered the musical standard of his composition. On the contrary, he raised his young disciples to the condition of lively participants to the singing & swinging on-stage-adventures (by the way: the show ought to be repeated in a larger space, allowing better “mass movements”; to my mind, it would also deserve to be “exported” to Western countries, as a proof of this little nations artistic capacities). Eli Yamin has employed here his vast knowledge as pianist, singer, educator, showman, and has creatively processed

the traditions that once made the glory of the American musical, dating as far back as the *Jazz Age*. This is a real service to America's greatest contribution to contemporary arts: spreading the message of jazz music throughout the world. As the musician himself confessed, during the elated aftermath of the show: "We felt the spirit of jazz when we arrived in Podgorica." The public's tremendous reaction just confirmed that statement.