

Jazz Alley audience follows Antonio Sanchez and Migration's 'Meridian' lines



“I usually don't like talking before the show,” Antonio Sanchez explained to a near-capacity, Jazz Alley crowd last Tuesday. But Pat Metheny's four-time, Grammy-winning drummer and the *Birdman* soundtrack artist kind of had to. He and his new, four-piece Migration band were about to lay down the entire *Meridian Suite* album from front to back, *live* — with only charts and innate, collective trust to guide them.

As Sanchez introduced his Migration band members — fiancée Thana Alexa on vocals, saxophonist/EWI Seamus Blake, keyboardist John Escreet, bassist Matt Brewer — he knew he was asking a lot of the audience. He was asking them to take a blind leap of faith and tag along on a strange trip without the standard covers of a typical jazz session. The strange thing is, every last person in the audience did, with bells on.

Even more astonishing, the audience *got* the often elaborate, intricate, out there material. After the show, Alexa affirmed that people not only followed the band on this journey, but they understood the journey's varying aspects. After several years supporting one another on each other's records — her 2014 debut record *Ode To Heroes* has received much favor in the jazz community — she and Sanchez will marry in September.

Sanchez added that he meant for his June 9, 2015 release to be listened to many times to completely get all the points of those imaginary meridian lines in the ultimate concept album, admittedly his most ambitious. He also meant for the five-track *Meridian Suite* (“my attempt at writing a musical novel”) to touch on different styles for different types of fans. There's the abstract avant-garde — out there music, there's R&B funk, an orchestral dance, light, Pat Metheny wordless vocals scattered throughout, keeping the humanizing suite intact; there are moments for everyone to enjoy.

Antonio Sanchez and his Migration truly shined in the moments. Unlike a classical recital, Sanchez encouraged the audience to respond boisterously to whatever they liked. He also joked earlier, “Don't clap yet, you might hate it.”

Not a chance.

From the moment Escreet built the foundation on that familiar, searching urgency of a melodic line reaching out farther and farther to encompass the other musicians, the 55-minute ride through the *Meridian Suite* was mesmerizing and far from too long.

Thana Alexa and Seamus Blake shared a dual vocal line without saying a word. They shadowed, mirrored, and finished each other's thoughts tone on tone, fluidly slipping from one melodic moment to another, softly setting a celestial mood. Alexa's voice soared impressively with a range that quite took everyone's breath away, impossibly low — like the hum of a bank of computers on an alien space ship approaching earth — to the omnipresent heights where only angels dared tread.

When the music approached an esoteric consciousness, her voice kept the human and humane element, perhaps symbolizing the evolution of a people, as well as a universal spirit guide lovingly presiding.

Who is John Escreet? The British keyboardist and composer, together with bandleader Sanchez, kept Migration from migrating off into the nether regions of La La land. Plying at the guts of his grand piano, his tender touch elicited unearthly howls, tethered to an earthly recollection of the most universal pulse in the most musical runs, almost as if he had a clone on a second instrument no one here's ever heard of. While Alexa provided evocative compassion, Escreet — also on synth — controlled the shifting moods, steering the ship back home.

Another moment that had the musicians in the audience dropping their jaws was in the band's impeccable timing. Not just ending a track with a flourish, but ending abruptly without any seeming cues whatsoever from Sanchez. There's one number the keyboardist and Sanchez performed perfectly in sync on a slightly off-kilter groove, slightly out of the pocket, but oh so in the pocket of a half-loping lock. With Escreet's alienesque synth and Sanchez mining his kit for gold, they continued that loping, off-kilter groove as Blake took off on a sax solo.

Sanchez remained calm, cool, and collected from behind his drum kit, a Yoda swiping and stroking at his drums' surface in smooth

circular waves, as if he's cleaning up a mess as he goes along, hardly in a hurry, hardly a care in the world. Yet, his hands are constantly moving at three times the pace of an ordinary jazz musician, as if the very molecules contained pulsating pieces.

When Sanchez matched up with bassist Matt Brewer and saxophonist Blake, it was a surreal moment. Pianist Escreet, in a rare moment of rest, sat and watched with wonder as the rhythm trio sought to untangle their meridian lines in a cascading, ethereal but lucid acoustic jazz rev-up. They maintained their vibe while furiously flipping through pages of their charts.

By the time the band returned for an encore – *New Life's* "Nighttime Story" – the audience was ready for more. Again Alexa and Blake teamed up to trade more than glances but share notes, performing lead and backup vocals. The saxophonist played as if he were an extension of the vocalist, and the vocalist sang as if there were two of her, as Escreet doused the room with a joyful gospel of 10,000 angels on one line of keys.

As vocalist Thana Alexa and saxophonist Seamus Blake headed toward the end of the encore, they switched parts, did you catch that? Her vocals riding softly beneath his sax, then floating above.

The entire *Meridian Suite* set went by in a flash, well-conceived, and well-received, even though it wasn't exactly the kind of music Jazz Alley audiences are typically used to. What a refreshing change!



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Jul 7, 2015

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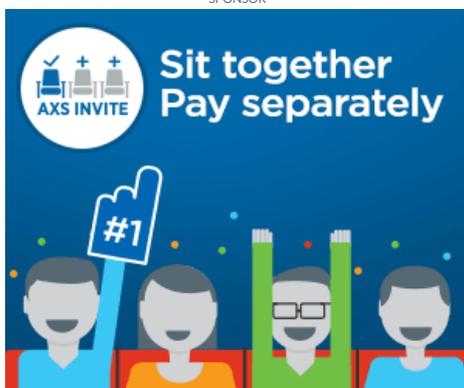
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