

On The Road | Clem Ehoff's Trio Plays "Under the Stars"

By Gloria Krolak

The stars weren't out the night Michael and I drove to Van Gogh's Ear, a café in downtown Union that features jazz on Sunday nights. In fact, it was raining so hard that flooding forced us to detour. But once inside the quirky little storefront under a wall-size reproduction of Vincent Van Gogh's "The Starry Night," they shone like diamonds. The Clem Ehoff Trio was in full swing as we walked through the door.

Pianist and composer Ehoff, with Carl Scariati on bass and Mitch Germansky on drums, formed a tight V, their instruments nearly touching, stars ablaze behind them. Three sets included the romantic "My One and Only Love," an extended and richly improvised "Green Dolphin Street," with quotes from "Chattanooga Choo Choo" and "Surrey with the Fringe on Top" tossed in playfully; the Bruno Martino/Joel Siegel ballad, "Estaté," and the familiar movie theme, "Days of Wine and Roses." "Cool Air" and "Another Day," were two of Ehoff's Latin-laced originals.

Bassist Scariati transported Van Gogh's Ear to a café in Madrid's Plaza del Mayor with his long, exquisite Spanish-hued solo, a prologue to the Miles Davis tune, "Solar." They followed with an up-tempo Scariati tune — the bassist is also a composer — "From the Heart," closing with, naturally, "Stella By Starlight."

Ehoff's influences are most clearly the Latin rhythms of vibes player Cal Tjader. In the early '80s, while living in San Francisco, Ehoff studied with Al Zulaica, a pianist of Tjader's. Composer-bandoneon player Astor Piazzola, who helped popularize Argentina's folk dance, the tango, was another strong influence. The bandoneon, similar to an accordion, was introduced to Argentina by German sailors. It became the

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The Clem Ehoff Trio at Van Gogh's Ear Café: Clem Ehoff, Mitch Germansky and Carl Scariati. Photo by Michael J. Ryan.

soul of tango. In one tune, introduced as "not a tango, not a bolero, but a 'tangolero,'" Ehoff swung the Argentinean's once controversial nuevo tango, a hybrid of folk music, jazz and classical.

Ehoff selects his band members with care, attempting to explain the "chemistry" by saying the union just has to feel right. The connections among the three were both loose and taut as they freely improvised and came back to center at Ehoff's cue. Drummer Germansky, playing his 1964 Slingerland set, made his snare sound more like a conga, giving Ehoff the Latin vibe he sought. The trio sounded well-rehearsed and comfortable. Conversely, neither Scariati nor Germansky had ever heard the ballad "More or Less," before they were asked to play what Ehoff, a prolific songwriter, had penned just two days earlier. It was both a rehearsal and a flawless debut. Then Ehoff added, almost apologetically, "I write so many songs, I'm often at a loss for names."

The café is a fusion of family bistro and West Village coffeehouse. Folks feel at home enough to play cards in cushioned swivel chairs, old-time kitchen chairs, tall stools or even the upholstered wing chairs we settled into. Sarah Perara, who's owned the club with her chef brother Rob for four years, (it

originally opened under the same name 18 years ago), coaxed an eclectic furniture assortment into cozy nooks along one wall with bookcase dividers. Since the upholstered chairs get a lot of wear, she replaces them often, although she noted that unique old seating in good condition is hard to find. No one remembers how the café got its name, just that there was an obvious preference for art and jazz on the menu, continued by a second owner who later sold the establishment to the Peraras. These two entrepreneurs have also chosen to continue the legacy of jazz.

Usually there are original works for sale on the walls, but we happened to catch them between artists. Located so near Kean University, the venue attracts a college-age crowd stirred, not shaken, with families and jazz fans. The café has no liquor license; feel free to bring your own. The atmosphere, at least on Jazz Sunday, is subdued and reflective. The only fast moves were by the busy but polite wait staff.

Having had a late lunch, we opted for a small dinner. We shared the spinach dip with nachos, plenty for two. Michael had roast beef sliders and I ordered quesadillas, both very satisfying. Dessert was a locally made carrot cake. Our total, with \$4 cover each and drinks, was less than \$50. Parking is free on Stuyvesant Street or the lot behind the café. If you park there use the rear door. One tip: If you use the front glass door, it is not locked; it's just really hard to open. A server, if one is nearby, or another patron will jump up to let you in with a neighborly welcome. JJ

Van Gogh's Ear Cafe
1017 Stuyvesant Ave. | Union, NJ
(908) 810-1844
Sunday night Jazz or Blues
8-11PM, \$4 cover
www.vangoghsearcafe.com