

Ornette Coleman Quintet at the Sydney Opera House

Alto sax, trumpet, violin- Ornette Coleman
Acoustic Bass – Tony Falanga
Electric Bass - Charnette Moffett
Piccolo Bass – Al Mac Dowell
Drums – Denardo Coleman

On Sunday the 24th Feb 2008 a friend and I drove to Sydney to see the Ornette Coleman Quintet at the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall. It was not with the usual excitement and anticipation I'd normally feel when seeing one of my favourite overseas musicians. Ornette is not a favourite of mine at all. I only have one of his albums, 'Song X' with Pat Metheny and I don't really like it or play it. I only bought it because it won Downbeats' album of the year for both readers and critics polls in 1986.

I went to see Ornette because he is a legend and at his age (77) he won't come back too many more times. He changed the way a lot of people thought about music, some loved what he did while others hated this new 'Free Jazz' as it became known. He was at the forefront of the development of this new style of jazz in the mid to late 50's.

The Concert Hall was full to capacity with a lot of Sydney's jazz community coming together for this event. Sandy Evans was three seats along from us while James Greening was sitting just in front.

Ornette has always been polarizing with his music and this theme continued on the night. While there may have been an enthusiastic standing ovation at the end of the show, there was also a steady stream of people walking for the door throughout the concert. Perhaps they were unaware of the style of music they were to hear, or perhaps it was the makeup of the quintet that turned them off.

Three basses makes for a very muddy sound with Tony Falanga bowing his acoustic for most of the night while Charnette Moffett was all over his fretless bass like a monster. The other bass player, Al MacDowell seemed a little lost at times not really sure where he fit into the scheme of things. Denardo Coleman on drums played very free and loose as the music demanded. However, drummers are fundamentally there to keep time which, to my ears, he didn't really do.

What do you say about Ornette? He walked on stage to an enthusiastic welcome looking resplendent in a bright blue suit with black and white spats. He played alto sax, some trumpet and even less violin (which was not such a bad thing as by the sound of his playing, I'm pretty sure he doesn't know how to play the violin). He spoke to the audience once at the beginning of the show and that was it for the rest of the performance.

A legend? An enigma? A fraud? He's been called each of these and I'm not sure where I sit with it all. If I had been listening to the music on a CD, I would have turned it off as it

is certainly not easy to listen to. Watching helped to keep the interest level up amongst all of the musical chaos, but it was still not easy going. I'm a real sucker for a melody. Ornette often plays in a melody free zone. You sure will have trouble trying to whistle some of his stuff!!

One of the highlights of the show was the opening act of virtuoso didgeridoo player Mark Atkins who played four pieces, three didge solos with the other piece being didge and guitar. He cast a spell over the crowd with his incredible technique and imagination.

So we saw Ornette. He came, he played and he left me happy that I had seen a man who has played a major role in jazz history and its development, but he also left me wondering what all of the fuss was about. I'm still not a disciple of Free Jazz, but at least I saw where it came from.

Steve Gaul