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James Tormé and his Jazz All Stars **(The Bull's Head, March 29th 2014. Review by Andrew Cartmel)**

After years of under-attended gigs at the old Bull's Head it's cheering to see the new jazz room there packed with people on a Saturday night. I'm not exaggerating, either — it's standing room only for singer **James Tormé**. Inheritor of one of the most famous names in the business, James immediately proceeds to demonstrate there's no nepotism involved in his presence tonight as he launches straight into *Almost Like Being in Love* with perfect swing and absolute control. A great voice, and very powerful. I'd say something here about iron fists in velvet gloves if I hadn't voluntarily embargoed the word 'velvet' for the duration of this review.

In *No Moon At All* James begins to show what else he can do with that voice, skimming effortlessly over the punchy, haunting tenor sax of **Brandon Allen** and silvery flashes of cymbals from drummer **Martyn Kaine**. Brandon Allen gives the song a bebop subtext while the rhythm section goes for swing. James Tormé has a voice that rocks the room, that you can feel as a sympathetic vibration in your diaphragm. The mood changes to rough-edged, soulful rhythm and blues with the Ray Charles number *Drown in My Own Tears*. Brandon Allen particularly catches the raw, smoky R&B feel of the number. He could be playing at a Saturday night fish fry, rather than Barnes, where people are steaming their scallops with vermicelli. His tenor solo rises like swirling smoke while Martyn Kaine maintains a metronomic pulse on drums with staccato cymbal passages. Allen's solo builds to a magnificent squawking conclusion that is almost in free jazz territory.

The brilliant arranger Marty Paich was one of Mel Tormé's best and most frequent collaborators, so it's wonderful to hear Tormé's son perform Paich's classic arrangement of *Too Close for Comfort*. The singer and Brandon Allen harmonise in a benign blast of sound and then Allen gets a showcase bebop solo in this beautifully arranged miniature, which makes a quartet sound like a big band. James Tormé scats with concise, immaculate skill. **Tom Farmer's** hip, bouncing upright bass provides the floorboards that the soloists stroll across, along with Martyn Kaine's joyous drumming.

But one of the heroes of the evening has to be pianist **Malcolm Edmonstone** who stepped into the breach at the last moment. *What Is There to Say* begins with just Edmonstone and James Tormé, the piano rising like the skeletal scaffold of a tower into the sky where the floating clouds of the singer's vocals await. James Tormé's voice is fascinatingly different from his father's — more plangent, playful and reverberant. The song is a concise masterpiece.

Mel Tormé's hit *Mountain Greenery* is revisited in a fascinating version. James sings an intoxicating flow of vocals in this finger snapping, toe tapping number. Martyn Kaine's delirious drums and cymbals and Tom Farmer's high speed bass are adorned with Malcolm Edmonstone's shards of Basie. The effortless time changes performed by James Tormé and the quartet re-contour the tune into modernistic chunks and Brandon Allen's restrained, intermittent sax is like a gleam of precious ore in the mother rock.

It's impressive how Brandon Allen controls his virtuosic playing, using immense restraint so as never to overwhelm the vocals. Restraint is evident in James Tormé, too. His voice is extraordinarily powerful. He controls it like a tiger on a leash. Occasionally he lets it off the leash — and then watch out.

Comin' Home Baby by Ben Tucker and Bob Dorough was another Mel Tormé hit. Martin Farmer's intricate cross-weave of bass sets the mood, then James Tormé launches into a skipping, surging vocal. Brandon Allen, his saxophone henchman, joins in as they perform a heist that corners the market in cool. Malcolm Edmonstone plays coruscating runs that interweave, coil the tune up, then unleash it, spilling cascades of notes before he begins to hammer at the number with machine-gun authority. Martyn Kaine's delicate drumming is like the excited heartbeat of a small creature before turning into a deep, thunderous, sonorous solo. Over all of this, James's masterclass scatting unfurls in a liquid surge.

But the towering enormity of James Tormé's voice, and his immaculate timing, is really evident on *The Street Where You Live*. It's a rich, rhapsodic voice with vast reserves of power — I might mention a foghorn here, if I hadn't vowed to abstain from using the word 'fog'.

When Sunny Gets Blue was another homage to a great Mel Tormé arranger, Angela Morley (née Wally Stott), while *In the Heat of the Night* showcased the exquisitely tormented, soulful tenor of Brandon Allen. In an evening brimming with brilliant moments it's difficult to chose favourites, but Bobby Timmons' *Dat Dere* received an unforgettable treatment, featuring the unstoppable fluency of James Tormé's vocals over the ticking cymbals and drum rolls of Martyn Kaine and exhilarating chords from Malcolm Edmonstone that progress towards an intricate, tripping, trilling piano feature. Then Brandon Allen launches a sweetly piercing tenor solo that develops into a big sound, like a searchlight being shone around the room.

This is a great jazz quartet fronted by an extraordinary singer with immense resources — on top of everything else, his phrasing on *Love for Sale* was audacious and brilliant. You should catch them all, live or on recordings, as soon as you can.

