

Peter Kontrimas Quartet Reminds Us To Swing (Brett Sorbo)

Upright bassist Peter Kontrimas swung us into 2026 in the Jazz Baroness Room at the Mad Monkfish in Cambridge on Saturday evening, January 3rd. He was joined by a quartet of stalwart New England jazzmen, with tenor saxophonist Arnie Krakowsky calling the setlist and pianist Russell Hoffman and drummer Steve Langone filling out the rhythm section. Kontrimas was introduced on this night as “one of the most respected veterans of the Boston jazz scene,” an honor which became apparent when he graced the audience with his deep bass tone, singable solos, and his sharpness in responding to the improvisations of his bandmates. Moreover, Kontrimas often used his bow at the endings of songs, a tasteful treatment which has sadly become less common in jazz.

Spearheaded by Krakowsky’s insistent riff-based playing, the quartet ignited enthusiasm among the dinner-and-drinks crowd. They preferred patient phrase-building to cosmic exploration and succeeded in generating energy by communicating rhythmic ideas facilitated by Langone’s cymbal precision. At times, Langone quietly sang while listening to Krakowsky improvise, with a giddy smile that he struggled to hold back. His comping elevated each soloist, supporting and challenging them as necessary. Hoffman enjoyed scaling the piano with an original synthesis of vocabulary: the contrapuntal sophistication of high beboppers, pentatonic schemes à-la McCoy Tyner, and melodic doubling reminiscent of Oscar Peterson. Equally notable were his chordal decisions during Kontrimas’ solos, such as drones moving in diatonic sequence or altered chords that questioned our concept of resolution.

The evening focused on songbook repertoire, including lesser known tunes such as “Johnny Come Lately” (Billy Strayhorn), “Purple Gazelle” (Duke Ellington), and the riff-blues “Disorder at the Border” (Coleman Hawkins). The quartet featured a ballad in each set, including a fine rendition of “Emily” (Johnny Mandel/Johnny Mercer) where Kontrimas let his bass ring out a little longer than the beat. Krakowsky capped off the evening by reminding us of his penchant for memorable hooks, calling “Lester Leaps In” (Lester Young) and regaling the crowd with a blend of elaborate melodies and blues moans. After the show, the group mingled with members of the audience, musicians arriving for the 10 P.M. jam session, and those who seemed to be long-time friends.

Such a satisfying night of music not only pays respect to the decades of experience in Kontrimas’ group, but to the optimism and humility that radiated from each band member. In addition to Langone’s grin, Hoffman could be seen clapping along to a solo. Kontrimas and Krakowsky often raised eyebrows in approval when somebody in the group took a chance. Like guys who love what they do, they joked around in between songs. There was no self-doubting. Instead, humor, trust, and playfulness culminated in an uplifting evening of sound.