

*Chico Freeman's quartet shows its leader's ability to organise as it delivers a stimulating set at Cadogan Hall, according to Ronald Atkins*

Odd in a way to encounter Chico Freeman on a bill that also featured The Cookers. His career includes spells with very similar all-star groups, not to mention a long-standing familiarity with rhythm sections sparked by The Cookers' Cecil McBee and Billy Hart. This was his own all-American quartet, however, with Luke Carlos O'Reilly on piano, Kenny Davis on bass and regular colleague Michael Baker at the drums. It's perhaps worth mentioning Freeman's only horn on display this night was the tenor saxophone.

His emergence in Chicago had tended at the start to reflect a connection with the city's more avant-garde music. Since then, you could say he has espoused traditional values in contemporary fashion. The tonal influence of John Coltrane remains but kept under control, so much so that in certain contexts the sound veers surprisingly close to that of Stan Getz.

What the five numbers played made abundantly clear was the leader's ability to organise, as witnessed by the piano taking an independent role in the theme statements. The opener, named Elvin after one of Freeman's previous employers, kicked off in archetypal free fashion rapidly overtaken by a furious drum barrage. It settled into modal improvising, with the tenor growing progressively less agitated and the first glimmerings of a 4/4 beat emerging when the piano took over.

That set the standard for what followed. The lilting Erika's Reverie began with just tenor and bass, Freeman's "sheets of sound" being smooth rather than frantic, before again a slither of 4/4 alongside the piano solo, though O'Reilly cannily tended to play across it. Relaxed conclusion, with snatches of Killer Joe breaking through.

Cutting bass lines from Kenny Davis launched the next number, lively and Latinish. A waltz, To Hear A Teardrop In The Rain, began with unaccompanied tenor and continued at a leisurely pace that switched to a rocking 4/4 for the closing blues, the perfect end to a stimulating set.

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