

## Kriya Octet — Intelligent stretch rhythm taffy and Beat Era jazz

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Pianist Michael Smolens brought his compositional skills and his eight piece band to the Sanchez Concert Hall Saturday night. The band is called Kriya and the sound they play is modern stretch rhythm taffy and Beat Era jazz. Band members are: Michael Smolens on piano, voice, balafon and alto flute; Alan Hall on drum set, djun-djuns and dumbek; Fred Randolph on acoustic and fretless electric bass; Steve LaPorta on world percussion (congas, bongos, bells, rattlers, shakers, timbales, bird whistle); Mike Olmos on trumpet and flugelhorn; John Gove on trombone; Alex Murzyn on C and alto flutes, soprano, alto and tenor saxes and bass clarinet; and Gene Burkert on C and alto flutes, piccolo, soprano, alto, tenor saxes and bass clarinet. Except for one Beatles tune, all songs were composed by Smolens.

Kriya's music walks a blazer's trail of Brazilian Carnival and contemporary cool right across a clear blue podium when Beat poets like Jack Hirschman would wake you up with the notes from your own brain thinking. Smolens compositions are intelligent and full of wired splash. Some catch a rhythmic groove that set a listener's

hips in motion. Others spray musical lines phrased by Jackson Pollock. Smolens music is for folks who like their jazz with Mensa on the side.

Now about some of those instruments played. Of West African origin, the balafon predates the xylophone. Wooden keys are set on a frame with gourds underneath. It speaks the timbre of language and in the case of Smolens, instrument, it has 22 notes. Djun-Djuns are two-headed West African pulse drums. Dumbek is an hour-glass type drum of both the Middle East and North Africa.

The performance opened with "The Island That Wept." Coconut bass, kettle drumming, Rain Forest percussion, stopper trombone, flugelhorn sass and snapping beats of brass and wind accompanied by Smolens on keyboard showers, skated the audience right into the funhouse central that is Kriya.

"Sweet Pepper" was intoxicating samba. The ballad "Corinthian Vase" put Gene Burkert and his alto sax in the spotlight of sugar solo symphony. Talking drum chat between Smolens and drummer Hall made "Jaco" a swirling percussion rhythm buffet. "Summer Highlands" was a dance abandon with good drummer talk and the balafon laughing like old grandpa, singing bones. "Essentions" is the title track

from their upcoming CD. It was inspired by Lyle Mays and Pat Metheny. Like the sound of Metheny and Mays "Essentions" is a bit of spontaneous combustion with Smolens reaching into his compositional grab bag and pulling out bursts of energy which include vocal vowel croons and existential saxophone — there's no flip switch into the calm. Set II began with "The Blue Cymbal." Here Times Square, Greenwich Village and the Purple Onion circa 1959 met and scurried into the sublime. "Russelling and Bobbing" had great musicians but too much freeway. "Lavalava" was approximately 20 minutes of a mostly West African approach to seven different moods of polished gems.

Smolens arrangement of "For No One" (Lennon/McCartney) for my money would have had Lennon whistling in admiration and McCartney storming the Exit — which is exactly what makes this a thoughtful listen. P.S. bass player Randolph is just pure and potent groove on this song and every song. Leaves of peace played through Smolens, sensitive piano and Alex Murzyn's clouds-of-dreams soprano sax on the duet "Through Nora's Eyes." "Six To Five" a kind of tired traffic jam blast ended the show like a so-so dessert after a great meal.