

FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DE JAZZ DE MONTRÉAL

Much ado about not so bad

JAZZ

The Bad Plus, Jean Beaudet, Egberto Gismonti, Orchestre National de Jazz, David Amram, D'Gary

At the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal

REVIEWED BY MARK MILLER

Scenes from a festival. . . . The Bad Plus isn't actually all that bad. Not "extra" bad. Not even just plain bad. The much-hyped New York trio of pianist Ethan Iverson, bassist Reid Anderson and drummer Dave King, skilled musicians to a man, is simply not very interesting as jazz trios go. And perhaps the jazz trio is the wrong yardstick anyway.

The Bad Plus doesn't do certain things that jazz trios typically should — really improvise, for example. This trio's unflinching arrangements of its anthemic tunes ring heavily in the bass register and splash around the upper half of the keyboard and across the stage to King's cymbals and drums. Its solos, as such, tend to reiterate rather than develop the melodic or harmonic material at hand, and with a punkish sort of persistence at that. The trio's energy and flair are real, but it still all seemed at the Spectrum on Monday night like much

ado about very little.

The Bad Plus is nevertheless not without its influence. Jean Beaudet, who leads a *real* jazz trio, had a BP moment the night before at the Salle Gesù with his tune *Too Many Penguins*, which lurched and crunched as BP tunes generally do. The performance brought the Montreal pianist and his musicians a good hand but, tellingly, it was Beaudet's sensitive account of the ballad *Everytime We Say Goodbye* that garnered a real ovation.

Egberto Gismonti has appeared seven times at the Festival International de Jazz de Montréal in its first 25 years, a fact that seemed to surprise and impress the Brazilian pianist, guitarist and composer, just as he was clearly surprised and impressed by the sympathetic reading that his folk-inspired music received from his accompanists, the 20-piece Montreal chamber ensemble I Musici under the direction of Yuli Turovsky.

The man's clearly a romantic, small "r" and big "R" both. The Big "R" was all over his piano music. His guitar pieces were rather congested, a tangle of vivacious lines and Brazilian dance rhythms that he only compounded in the orchestrations he had prepared for I Musici. His piano compositions, on the other hand, had a wonderfully wide emotional sweep and clarity



Reid Anderson, Ethan Iverson and David King of The Bad Plus.

that not even his most impetuous melodic figures could confound.

There are several distinguishing features of France's Orchestre National de Jazz that are not common to big bands in general. In no particular order, these include an accordion (but no piano), two basses, two guitars (one too many), a pocket trumpet, an *oud* (briefly) and more trombones (three) than any other instrument. The 14-piece ensemble, currently under the direction of guitarist Claude Barthélemy, also comes with one of those rare characters that only the contemporary European scene could produce, Médéric Collignon. His is the pocket trumpet, which he often

set aside on Sunday at the Salle Gesù in favour of his own, equally expressive voice, as though the two — horn and larynx — were interchangeable. Time and again, his spontaneity, theatricality and sheer mischief gave the ONJ a point of interest when Barthélemy had allowed the proceedings to bog down in some postmodern orchestral pastiche or in yet another of his own, overwrought guitar solos. Admittedly, there were some nice moments in the concert that didn't involve Collignon in some way or other, but there weren't many.

David Amram is 73. The genial American multi-instrumentalist, composer and all-round jazz am-

bassador offered this bit of personal information twice during a noon-hour concert with his quintet last Saturday in the Complexe Desjardins, a revelation in keeping with the autobiographical tone of his performances these days. Often as not, his introductions began, "In 195. . . , I. . . ," followed by an anecdote — mostly in French on this occasion — about something he once did or someone he once knew.

Amram *has* done a great deal in a career that encompasses The Beats, bebop, Afro-Cuban music and Third Stream jazz. And he's still quite the going concern, albeit in a slightly absent-minded way. Once safely under way, however, each piece of music seemed rather homespun, with the degree of humility involved, not the level of virtuosity, as its most compelling quality.

It would have been easy in all of the festival's comings and goings to miss the Malagasy guitarist and singer known simply as D'Gary. Most of the tens of thousands who wandered the streets around Place des Arts last Thursday night probably did, drawn to louder acts on larger stages. But those who stopped at the corner of Jeanne-Mance and De Maisonneuve, however briefly, would have heard something quite magical.

It would be culturally inappropriate, of course, to describe D'Gary's guitar work in American terms. It's more reasonable to note that there are similarities between his style, with its tumbling lines and jumbled notes, and that of the African *kora* masters. Or to say simply that his playing was both hypnotic and exhilarating at the same time.

The Festival International de Jazz de Montréal continues to July 11.