

Chemistry sparks Sillan & Young

'Pop-jazz, neo-soul' quintet reaching for a wider audience

BY ROGER LEVESQUE, FREELANCE JANUARY 23, 2009

Because we experience most music on a visceral level, it's easy to forget that so much of it comes about as the product of focused collaboration.

Teamwork and chemistry have been essential to the Calgary duo-cum-quintet known as Sillan & Young. Variouslly dubbed "pop-jazz" or "neo-soul," they visit The Haven Social Club tonight.

"It really is a family," says singer Johanna Sillanpa of her musical partnership with guitarist Aaron Young. "Aaron is like a brother to me, and there's nothing more personal than sitting down and writing songs together. Of course, not everything is autobiographical but we seem to know everything about each other's life."

Swedish-born Sillanpa and Saskatchewan-born Young met in Calgary in the late 1990s, shortly after her graduation from MacEwan College. They began working as a duo in 2002, making it a quartet the next year with the addition of bassist Kodi Hutchinson and drummer Tyler Hornby. An eclectic debut disc *Better Thing* came out in 2004, and the band expanded again to include Edmonton pianist Chris Andrew in 2007.

Both Sillanpa and Young just put in a busy year with the release of three separate CDs between them, starting with the second Sillan & Young effort, *Under My Feet* on Chronograph (her Christmas CD *One Wish* and his solo guitar *Works* are also new on the same label).

While Sillanpa says "it's difficult to put us in a box" for marketing, she admits the new album reflects a more deliberate effort to "streamline our many influences" and work towards wider appeal. Their new tunes are less guitar-driven, more of a full-band effort, constructed around pop hooks but loose enough that you can imagine the players stretching out jazz-style in live performance.

While their tunes simply credit Sillan & Young, she tends to pen most of the lyrics and melodies, Young sketches out the music, and the rest of the band arranged many of their own parts. Russell Broom (known for his work with Jann Arden) produced *Under My Feet*, an impressive effort that deserves the radio play it's getting already.

In the end, the group thirsts for wider performance opportunities outside of Alberta. Sillanpa says playing to 50,000 people at The Montreal Jazz Festival last summer was a career highlight. A California tour is in the offing.

You can hear the Sillan & Young band at the Haven (15120A Stony Plain Rd.) tonight, starting at 8:30. Tickets are \$12 in advance, \$15 at the door.

OBSESSION CONTINUES

Marrying a jazz quartet with a string quartet is another concept completely but it's working for Kent Sangster.

When the local reedman/bandleader brings out his quartet and the Obsessions Octet for two nights this Saturday/Sunday at the Yardbird, be prepared to hear a surprising range of tunes.

"It's always an interesting challenge for a jazz person like myself to write for strings," says Sangster.

"You have to remind yourself what's possible dynamically and to give the string players real content to play, and then hopefully you can try to write for a little bit of interplay."

The opening set will feature the quartet mixing it up with pieces by the great Polish film composer and jazz pianist, Krzysztof Komeda (1931-1969), and more deliberately jazzy repertoire, stuff that Sangster says is "really interesting but unlike anything I've ever played before."

When the strings join in for the second set, you can hear some new tunes Sangster has written, with works by Astor Piazzolla and Chucho Valdes, all working towards the Octet's next recording.

The quartet/octet plays today and Saturday at 9 p.m. at the Yardbird (10203 86th Ave.). Tickets are \$18 for members, \$22 for guests.

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