

# Jazzfest review: Mark Guiliana Jazz Quartet does contemporary acoustic jazz proud

Best known for his playing in various electric-jazz contexts, drummer Mark Guiliana led his acoustic jazz quartet to special heights Sunday night at the TD Ottawa Jazz Festival.

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The Mark Guiliana Quartet (left to right Fabian Almazan, Jason Rigby, Chris Morrissey and Mark Guiliana) at the 2017 TD Ottawa Jazz Festival DAN NAWROCKI

## Mark Guiliana Jazz Quartet TD Ottawa Jazz Festival Sunday night

These days, it usually strikes me as quaint at best and gratuitous at worst for a jazz group to have the word “jazz” in its name.

Sure, decades ago it worked for Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, the Art Farmer/Benny Golson Jazztet and the Jazz Crusaders — although that last group, in 1971, dropped the “Jazz” because they’d gotten less jazzy.

But in 2017? Really? All the cool groups sport cool names like Tim Berne’s Snake Oil, Darcy James Argue’s Secret Society or Ryan Keberle and Catharsis.

Well, the Mark Guiliana Jazz Quartet makes me think I might have to get over this hangup.

The name chosen by the 36-year-old New Jersey drummer for his group is, after all, simply a matter of clarity and contrast. Guiliana is well known in jazz and beyond for his mastery of contemporary hip hop- and electronica-based grooves such that musicians from jazz’s top tier — think Donny McCaslin, Dave Douglas, Brad Mehldau, and Gretchen Parlato, to name a few — seek him out for just that. And then there’s the drummer’s other group, Mark Guiliana Beat Music, that’s lives large in that plugged-in territory.

Meanwhile, the jazz quartet that played Sunday night at La Nouvelle Scène delighted the packed house with strictly acoustic music that throbbed with imagination and refined but rugged playing, if not bass drops and rewinds.

Guiliana, who a few nights before had powered saxophonist Donny McCaslin’s group to electric-jazz glory, was continually sparking with creativity. In both milieus, he was equally tasteful and attuned to the musical

ebb and flow on stage.

The drummer's bandmates — tenor saxophonist Jason Rigby, pianist Fabian Almazan, bassist Chris Morrissey — were distinctive individually and unified in their ensemble playing.

Rigby's sound was breathy but lucid, and his lines swirled appealingly, weaving around the music's harmonic signposts. Almazan had his own way of orchestrating at the piano, eschewing stock ways of expressing harmony for his own solutions drawn from a large grab bag. His linear playing also leaped out of the proceedings thanks to its left-of-centre predilection and ear-catching articulation. Bassist Morrissey work hand-in-glove with Guiliana, especially on the piece One Month, which featured a crazy unison melody for drums and bass at the outset. He also seemed to be having the most fun of the people on stage, with Guiliana placing a close second.

Morrissey also chipped in some smart, enigmatic compositions, including the set-opening Our Lady and The Mayor Of Rotterdam. While One Month was an obvious stunner, ABED was a highlight set to a swing beat and several tempos, with a knotty melody and an especially striking and urgent solo by Almazan.

The set didn't lack for affecting ballads either. September was a concise, rumbling tone poem that saw Guiliana adopting Thelonious Monk's classic strategy for making the music sound good — sitting it out completely. Even more fraught with emotion was the quartet's rendition of David Bowie's Where Are We Now?, with which Guiliana, who had played on the great singer-songwriter's swan-song album Blackstar, paid tribute to its composer. After Almazan's strident piano solo, the piece hit a heartbreaking height.

Given that Guiliana's drumming services so much in demand, it's especially heartening to hear him in charge of his own band and waving the flag for jazz, no less. The group is to have a new record out some months from now. I know a few hundred people in Ottawa who will likely be seeking it out.

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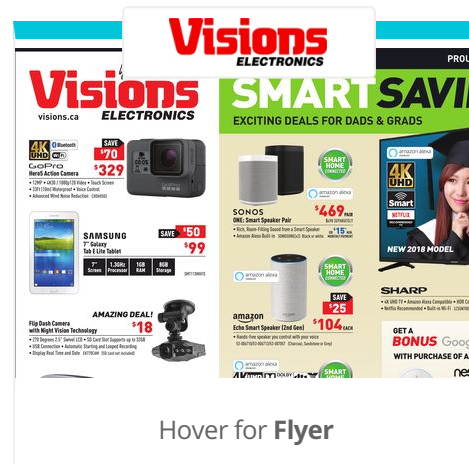
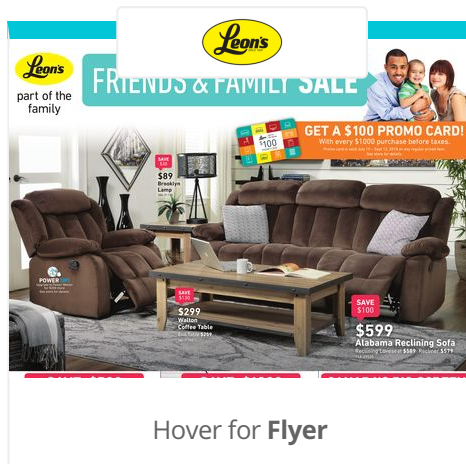
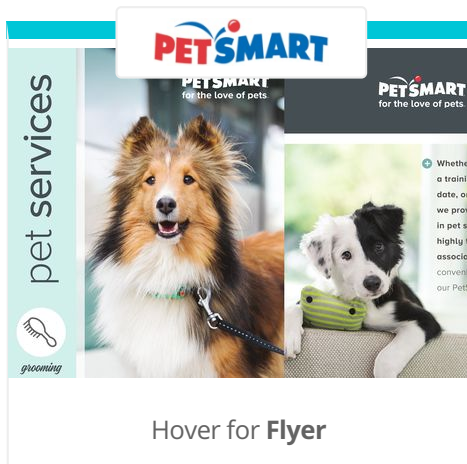
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