

Review: A deeper side to Frank Catalano at Green Mill

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The past three years have been daunting for Chicago tenor saxophonist Frank Catalano, who has been battling the effects of injuries he suffered in an auto accident.

But despite his troubles, or because of them (or both), Catalano turned in some of the most deeply considered music of his career Friday night at the Green Mill Jazz Club. Though listeners generally associate Catalano with a big-and-brawny style of playing, Catalano on this evening often showed a degree of subtlety and understatement that were new to his expressive vocabulary. The heft and might of his playing were present, as well, but there was no missing the nuance and intimacy of much of this work.

The spirit of John Coltrane hovered over this performance, in part because Catalano a few months ago recorded his response to the master's "A Love Supreme," a statement of faith that Catalano says helped guide him through his ongoing recovery. Catalano will be releasing that recording later this year, but the excerpts he performed indicated the seriousness and transformational nature of this project for him.

Some of his most revealing work emerged in the "Resolution" portion of "A Love Supreme," Catalano opening as dramatically as one might have expected but with considerable complexity of theme and tone. The epic scale and heroic dimensions of Coltrane's original were plain to hear, as were the intricacies, twists and turns of Catalano's reworking of this music. By segueing into his own "Sona" and then to Coltrane's "Naima," Catalano produced passages of remarkable serenity, especially in a whispering, *a cappella* coda. In effect, Catalano was revealing new dimensions of his art.

And though Catalano tends to lead bands that churn out huge blasts of sound, this time was a bit different. Leading quintet and sextet versions of his ensemble, he emphasized a welcome textural clarity, allowing each instrument to be heard rather than relying on a massive wall of decibels.

New to this lineup was Jimmy Chamberlin, perhaps best known as former drummer of the Smashing Pumpkins. But anyone expecting sledgehammer backbeats – or dreading them – would have been pleasantly surprised by Chamberlin's work. If anything, Chamberlin's playing encouraged the softer, subtler side of Catalano's music, the drummer crafting taut swing rhythm via thoroughly economical means. Chamberlin's less-is-more approach

eminently suited the somewhat more controlled, more measured facets of Catalano's playing and showed a real sensitivity to jazz aesthetics.

Add to this Gary Tu's linear guitar playing, Kurt Schweitz's nimble bass phrases, [Scott Williams](#)' shimmering pianism and Chris Paquette's Latin-tinged percussion, and Catalano clearly had quite a range of tonal resources to tap.

One hastens to note that Catalano offered plenty of bravura playing, as well, but perhaps more heart than ever in an intertwining of two ballads, "What a Wonderful World" and "At Last." The soulfulness and blues-based phrase-making of Catalano's solos stood out, Chamberlin's delicate brush work enriching the music.

And in "Big Al's Theme," named for the Green Mill's famous doorman, Catalano reminded listeners that he still can shake up a room when so inclined. But it was the vibrancy of Catalano's sound and intensity of his vibrato – not merely the volume level – that made this finale to the evening's first set memorable.

In retrospect, Catalano – who's 36 – may someday mark this evening as a new beginning for him. If so, it was a promising one.

The Frank Catalano Sextet plays at 8 p.m. Saturday at the Green Mill Jazz Club, 4802 N. Broadway; \$12; 773-878-5552 or greenmilljazz.com.

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