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Abraham Inc.

By John W. Lambert - January 29, 2011 - Raleigh, NC:

If clarinetist David Krakauer is the name-giver and organizing genius behind the genre-busting ensemble Abraham Inc., does that mean trombonist Fred Wesley is the law-giver, Moses? And if so, what about DJ Socalled, a.k.a. Josh Dolgin, or rapper C-Rayz Walz - where do they fit in? Well, if you were at the Secret Artist Series performance in Winston-Salem on Thursday or in NCSU's Stewart Theatre on Saturday night, where the joint was jumpin', to borrow an old Fats Waller line, and where there was, quite literally, dancing in the aisles, you know that putting these folks together, in one place, makes for an extraordinary event.

Yes, it's a long way from Columbus, GA, and Montgomery, AL [Wesley] to Montreal [Socalled], particularly with a detour to the Big Apple and its environs [Krakauer and Walz], but somehow the admixture - fusion, if you will - of klezmer and funk (er, what's that, a proper classical geek might ask - it's not in my *Funk & Wagnalls*, for sure!) worked amazingly well, resulting in a new kind of what some might call "world music" that drove the substantially large house wild with enthusiasm. And that without even mentioning the backup crew - guitarists Allen Watsky and Sheryl Bailey, bassist Jerome Harris, drummer Michael Sarin, trumpeter Freddie Hendrix, and saxophonist Brandon Wright. Imagine the impact of all that at once, amplified, in a moderately small auditorium. No wonder the excitement built to a fever pitch.

The music was a bit of this and a bit of that, mingled and melded into an astonishingly unified whole. Folks who have heard Krakauer with one of his several klezmer groups (the Klezmatic's *Rhythm & Jews* CD achieved considerable fame) - or in chamber music settings - might have guessed his strong presence in the ensemble, but that the trumpet and sax managed to be equal partners in many respects, including in the overall ensemble balance, seemed as remarkable as the perhaps even more incongruous integration of a huge drum set and three amplified guit-boxes. And then there was that Socalled guy - piano, synth, computer, microphone, accordion, vocals - a veritable one-man band, all on his own. On paper it might have been almost unthinkable, but those klezmer licks meshed pretty effectively with all that funk and other stuff. The tunes - for want of a better word, and in the absence of a printed program (so I'm indebted to Mark Tulbert of Center Stage for getting Krakauer to prove he can write *words*, too - the set list* is from his handwritten notes) - were sometimes recognizable fusions (there's that word again) of some well-known traditional musics, some of which were most likely familiar to some people in attendance, although the combinations were surely new to all save the Abraham Inc. groupies. For this listener, revelations abounded. There was for openers all that klezmer music, and who can deliver it better than Krakauer? Wesley was consistently amazing, and that he earned his keep with The Fabulous Flames merely enhanced his aura. A family-friendly, clean rapper? What to make of that? The Canadian was hot. There was time in the 90-minute show for everyone to solo at one point or another, so the crowd got to sample all assembled skills. The sound system was one of the best I've heard in "band" settings - plenty of power, evenly projected throughout the room, but rarely piercing or deafeningly overwhelming.

One song was truly autobiographical, although it would have been easy to miss the reference. Krakauer introduced "Ms. NC" with a tale about a gal from Winston-Salem falling for a Jewish musician from New York, but we know that to be a personal story, for after one of his last Raleigh gigs, a while back, he beat feet for W-S, to prepare for the wedding!

Otherwise, the evening was all over the map, literally and figuratively, with accents ranging from Yiddish to Deep South. "Balebosta" kicked it off, "Trombonik" advanced it into a higher gear, "Tweet-Tweet" and "Breakin' Bread" (of the hoecake variety) got the crowd heavily jived. Then there was Krakauer's amazing solo on "Synagogue Wail" (in which he never broke the line to take a breath - his circular approach to oxygen intake instead left the *crowd* breathless!), and "House Party," the noisy, boisterous, sometimes riotous concert conclusion which brought brave, mostly young dancers from the hall to the stage, during which the place went crazy all over again.

Some of us probably had no idea what to expect. Abraham Inc. exceeded the expectations, for sure.