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## Spring with the New York Jazz Choreography Project

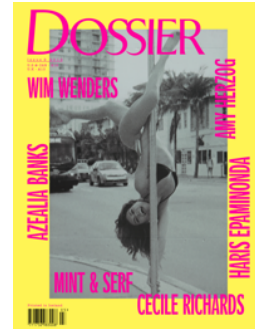


Jazz may be one of the most bewildering of art forms. It's so elusive, in fact, that people use the word "jazz" as if it were a synonym of "etcetera". Like, "She's into that whole indie scene: book readings, film festivals, obscure musicians—you know, all that jazz." A dated expression, indeed, but a valid point.

It's easy to associate jazz with its heyday in the roaring '20s, the brass rhythms of speakeasies and the knocking knees of flappers. But jazz didn't die with the 21st Amendment. It is alive and well today—it's ever evolving. As Billy Crystal, whose family founded the jazz label Commodore Records, once said: "The thing about jazz is it's free flowing; it comes from your soul." And that's evident in all 12 pieces of The New York Jazz Choreography Project, put on by Jazz Choreography Enterprises (JCE).

Marian Hyun and Merete Muentert, co-artistic directors of the non-profit JCE, produce two showcases a year: one in the spring and one in the fall. Their mission is to "give choreographers much-needed opportunities to develop their technical skills and creativity." They want audiences to appreciate jazz dance as "the rich art form that it is, with its glorious variety of styles and cultural influences." At its heart, JCE serves to nurture the genre as it continues to evolve well into the 21st century and beyond.

"Jazz Corner of the World," which closed the April 20th show, is a prime example of the ever-changing face of jazz. Choreographed by Crystal Chapman, the artistic director of New York TheatreDance Ensemble, it fuses bebop with hip-hop. Basically, the number is a homage to Birdland, the beatnik jazz haven named in honor Charlie "Bird" Parker—as imagined, and remixed, by Quincy Jones. The saxophones jive with the beat of woodblocks as nine women strut, shimmy and spin about the stage in fishnets and black leotards. In the periphery, a street dancer who—if she were a decade younger—could be a dancer in the movie *Breakin'*, watches, her body interpreting the song in its own way. Her joints are loose, limbs looping, sneakers...



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...shuffling. The casual, self-satisfying quality of her movements are both contrasted and complemented by the calculated clips of the other women's heels and their come-hither, over-the-shoulder gazes into the crowd.

Skipping back from seduction to purity, perhaps the most enchanting piece of the evening was smack in the middle of the showcase: "Me Again in Wonderland," choreographed by Megan Doyle of the [Community Dance Project](#). Propelled by tunes of whimsy and discovery, most notably DeVotchKa's "The Winner Is"—an instrumental version of their song, "How it Ends," and the score for *Little Miss Sunshine*—the girls were all elbows and kneecaps, lifted by invisible strings. With scrunched socks and pigtailed, they are a figment of Alice's imagination, the spritely lass who frolics about until she slips into a dizzying slumber. When she awakes, she is left with reality—no more puppets, no more make believe. She is alone, newly minted with maturity. She slips the ribbon from her long waves and retreats from the stage.

There's a similar girlish, forlornness to "I Carry Your Heart. I Carry It in My Heart," both choreographed and danced by [Kimberly Rose Dooley](#). Kimberly and her partner, Jaema Berry, act as mirrors, or shadows, for one another. One wears a black top and white skirt, the other a white top and black skirt. They even look alike. If one dips her hip, the other follows suit. If the one tilts her head, then the other is there to cushion it. With the music selection—Frank Sinatra's rendition of "My Funny Valentine"—and the E.E. Cummings poem from which the dance borrows its name, it's difficult to discern whether the piece is dreamy, wry, or both. Then again, maybe it's simply sad. One can't help but think that this girl is her own valentine. She carries her own heart and that is "the deepest secret nobody knows"—or so the poem goes.

Lastly, the most memorable of the pieces is "Build Up\_Break Down," choreographed by Michele Cuccaro. Set to Thomas Newman's "Plastic Bag Theme" and "Minutiae" from *American Beauty*, a group of women dressed in ballooning black dresses climb up and repel from four unhinged doors. They're wooden doors, painted white with round knobs. They're the doors that welcome and seal shut the fronts of houses. The women, who perform impressive feats of athleticism—some anchoring the doors, others pulling their bodies up as if the doors were actually gymnastic bars—gust about the floor, as if moved by an absent wind. Desperation and determination contort their faces. *If only the doors would open...* Yet, while you feel their struggle, you also see splendor in their movements.

Like the character, Ricky, in *American Beauty*—the insightful adolescent who films the plastic bag, tossing in the breeze—Michele is capturing an image, one that is absurd yet beautiful just the same. And that's jazz.

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“Build up\_Break Down” Michele Cuccaro, choreographer. Image by Jan La Salle. Top image: Jazz Choreography Enterprises, Sue Samuels.

*The New York Jazz Choreography Project's spring performance was at The Ailey Studios from April 20-22. The fall project will be at MMAC on October 19-20.*

This entry was written by Jennifer Dwoskin, posted on May 25, 2012 at 1:08 am, filed under Art, Events and tagged Commodore Records, jazz, Jazz Choreography Enterprises, Marian Hyun, Merete Muentner, New York Jazz Choreography Project. Bookmark the permalink. Follow any comments here with the RSS feed for this post. Post a comment or leave a [trackback](#): [Trackback URL](#).

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